

Jesus Fulfils the Law (Matthew 5:17-48)

by Dr Paul B Coulter, July 2008

Imagine a world where ...

- ... no one ever put you down or made you feel small
 - ... people were eager to build others up and to praise them
- ... no one bore a grudge, lashed out in anger or took another's life
 - ... people were quick to apologise and eager to right their wrongs
- ... no one ever used or abused you to fulfil their own desires
 - ... people approached relationships with respect, never selfishness
- ... no one ever cheated on their spouse or walked out on their kids
 - ... people valued family life and no one ever got neglected
- ... no one ever deceived you or failed to keep their word
 - ... people could be trusted, and deals were always honest
- ... no one ever took revenge and arguments never got out of hand
 - ... people delighted in helping those in need without complaining
- ... no one ever excluded you from their group or discriminated against you
 - ... people showed real love to others and wanted what was best for them

Imagine a world where right was always done and mercy was always shown...

... would you want to live in a world like that?

... would you mess it up if you did?

... what would you give to be like that even if no one else is?

This is the kind of world that Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in this section of it.

Outline of the Sermon

1. **The pathway into the Kingdom (5:3-10)** – the Beatitudes describe the attitudes of heart that lead someone into God's Kingdom and that result in the life of its citizens.
2. **The impact of the Kingdom (5:11-16)** – persecution and witness. The Kingdom will be met with opposition, but it will also bear witness to others who will recognise God's glory through its effects.
3. **The righteousness of the Kingdom (5:17-48)** – the standard of righteousness in the Kingdom fulfils the Law of God and reflects His character.
4. **The relationship with the King (6:1-7:11)** – an intimate, dynamic relationship with God as Father is normal for the Kingdom's citizens.
5. **The challenge of the Kingdom (7:12-27)** – there is a choice to be made between the Kingdom and our own way.

Wrong views of the Sermon on the Mount

I have come across at least four views of the *Sermon on the Mount* that I believe to be wrong, or at least deficient:

- a) **Utopian nonsense** – some people claim that no one could be expected to keep these rules and that Jesus is laughably naïve. In fact, they claim, His teaching is contrary to natural justice, especially when He tells us to turn the other cheek and not to retaliate when we are wronged or to do unto others as we would like them to do to us. The Sermon is no more relevant to our lives than a fairytale, and Jesus was a hopeless dreamer who ended up dying a terrible death, having failed to realise His utopia. This view is clearly inconsistent with belief in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God and with belief that the cross of Jesus was actually a victory over death and sin.
- b) **Ethical standard** – some people have recognised the beauty of the Sermon's teaching and have tried to adopt it as a guide to a better way of living. Gandhi was one example of this approach. He drew heavily

on the Sermon on the Mount in his approach to non-violent protest in India, but did not accept the other aspects of Christianity, in particular Christ's atoning death for sin (see Appendix Section 1 for more on Gandhi's view of the Sermon on the Mount). Gandhi's view is, however, unacceptable as the Sermon cannot be divorced from the one who spoke it, or from the context into which it is spoken, including the history of God's revelation to mankind in the Old Testament and the story of Matthew's Gospel, which leads inevitably to Christ's death and resurrection and to the apostolic proclamation of their significance. The ethical teaching of Christ cannot be accepted without also confronting the claims He made about Himself and His call to repentance and to acceptance of His Lordship.

- c) **Future relevance** – some people claim that the Sermon is not intended to be obeyed in the present age, but describes how people will live in the future, when Christ's Kingdom is revealed on earth (during a literal Millennial Kingdom). Although it is true that God's Kingdom will not be revealed in its fullness until Christ returns, and it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the differing views about the Millennial Kingdom, this view does not square with the facts that Christ commanded the apostles to teach new believers all that he had commanded them (Matthew 28:20) and said that the Spirit would remind them of all that He had taught (John 14:26) or that the Kingdom of God was a major theme in the preaching of the apostles in Acts (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23; 28:31). Clearly Jesus intended His teaching about the Kingdom of God, including the Sermon on the Mount, to become the basis of Christian discipleship, the pattern of Christian living.
- d) **Hypothetical argument** – some people claim that the teaching of the Sermon was simply intended to expose the impossibility of living according to the Law and to rebuke the Pharisees for their legalistic view of salvation. This view has some weight, as this was undoubtedly part of Christ's intention, but it cannot mean that the Sermon was not intended to be obeyed by followers of Christ. People who hold this view tend to emphasise the impossibility of fulfilling what Christ describes, and to make an unhelpful separation between the Law of God and the grace that came through Christ. They see the whole Sermon as a kind of hypothetical argument that is supposed to lead people to the conclusion that obedience is impossible so God must have something else in mind, and that something else is grace. This view doesn't square with the fact that the Sermon was addressed primarily to Jesus' disciples (5:1) or that He clearly expected these teachings to be taken seriously and to be obeyed (see His commands in 5:48 and 7:12, and His warning in 7:26-27).

So, having rejected each of these possible ways of understanding the Sermon, we must find a fifth option, one which takes the Sermon's teaching seriously and that does not divorce it from the person and mission of Christ.

The Scribes and Pharisees and the Law

The Old Testament Law of God was given to Israel through Moses. The Jews call the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses, the *Torah*. Jewish belief holds that along with the written Law Moses was given additional laws that were passed on through an oral tradition. In fact, this *Oral Torah* (also known as the *Tradition of the Elders* – see Matthew 15:2) actually developed from the interpretations of the written Law by Jewish Rabbis starting from the Babylonian Exile (in the 6th Century BC) onwards. Eventually these traditions came to be accepted as equal in authority with the written Law. After the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora in AD 70, there was increasing debate among Jewish scholars known as the *Tannaim* about the precise meaning of the oral traditions. This process of debating lasted for 130 years until around 200 AD when the conclusions were put in written form in one volume known as the *Mishnah*. The *Mishnah* is organised into six orders (*sedarim*) dealing with different aspects of the Law, each containing between seven and twelve tractates (*masechtot*; literally "webs"). There are 63 tractates in total, and each *masechet* is divided into chapters (*peraqim*) and paragraphs or verses (*mishnayot*, singular *Mishnah*). In English the *Mishnah* forms a book of around 800 pages.

During the years 200-500 AD, the Rabbinical writings were further developed to include the *Gemara*, which together with the *Mishnah* forms the *Talmud*. The *Gemara* consists of analysis of (or commentary on) the laws of the *Mishnah* mainly in the form of a dialectical exchange between a questioner and answerer. Two different *Talmuds* were compiled – an earlier less complete one in Jerusalem during the 4th Century AD (based exclusively on the views of Rabbis from Judea) and a later, more extensive one in Babylonia in around

500 AD (including the views of Rabbis in Babylonia as well as Judea). Current editions of the *Babylonian Talmud* in English extend to between 30 and 70 volumes and over 15000 pages!

The *Scribes* of Jesus' time were a group of scholars who were dedicated to the study of the Law, to making copies of it and to teaching it to the people. The *Pharisees* (meaning "separated") were a religious sect who were dedicated to living in obedience to the Law, and who accepted the authority of both the Old Testament and the Oral Law. To try to avoid breaking the written Law, the *Tradition of the Elders* attempted to create a "hedge around the law" by adding detail to it. The idea was that at even if one of these additional rules was broken, at least the written Law of God would remain intact. The table below summarises some of the additions to the Law of Moses contained in the *Tradition of the Elders* that are apparent from the Gospels:

Mosaic Law	Tradition of the Elders
Refrain from work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11)	Harvesting is work. Plucking a handful of grain is harvesting. Therefore Jesus' disciples were guilty of breaking the Sabbath by eating some grain plucked in the fields as they passed through (Matthew 12:1-2). Healing is the work a physician performs. Therefore one cannot heal on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10).
Fasting, on special occasions, as a sign of repentance.	Fast twice a week (Luke 18:12)
Tithe, give one tenth, of your income to the Lord (Malachi 3:8-10)	Tithe everything, even down to garden herbs (Matthew 23:23). Jesus does not reprove them for this.
Priests are to wash their hands in the Laver before offering sacrifice (Exodus 30:17-21)	All people are to wash hands before eating lest they pass ritual uncleanness to food, which, when eaten, would render the whole body unclean. Not as a hygienic precaution, but a ritual act of pouring water over the hands up to the wrists (Matthew 15:2).

There were three problems with this approach to the Law:

- a) It led them to place their oral traditions on a par with the authority of the word of God. This led to them judging people who failed to keep their traditions as if they were guilty of sin.
- b) Whilst they had tried make a hedge around the Law but ironically they had only succeeded in lessening its demands on them. There were other areas in which the Pharisees had actually reduced the demands of God's righteousness, and this will become evident from this study.
- c) Most importantly, they had missed the point that the law was meant to lead people into relationship of humility before God, not to salvation and certainly not to sense of moral superiority. The problem with human beings is that sin has damaged us, and our hearts are corrupt.

The Purpose of the Law

Three different aspects of the Old Testament Law have often been identified:

- o **Moral Law** – rules about right and wrong behaviour towards God and other people
- o **Ceremonial Law** – regulations about the priesthood, Temple, sacrifices and festivals
- o **Civil Law** – guidelines for Israel's rulers and judges about how crime was to be punished and the nation governed.

Although these three types of laws can be seen within the Old Testament Law, it impossible to separate the Law as recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy into three neat divisions. Often one section of laws includes regulations relating to two or three of these aspects interspersed with one another. Even the Ten Commandments, which are often presented as an encapsulation of the timeless "moral law" of God, include a law about the Sabbath Day that is part of the ceremonial law for Israel but is specifically revealed as being inapplicable to Christians in the New Testament. In addition, it is impossible to separate out the "civil law" as the whole of the Law was to be the standard by which the nation would be ruled. The whole Law was given to Israel through Moses, and all of it was equally authoritative and equally relevant to the nation.

So, then, what was the purpose of the Law? It must be said firstly that the Law was not intended to make people right with God in isolation from relationship with Him! It would be wrong to think that God ever intended His Law to be understood as an answer to the problem of sin. The Law was given in the context of

a covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel, and that relationship predated and was foundational to the Law. Within that covenant relationship, the Law had three purposes:

1. **To reveal what God is like.** The Law reveals God's character. Through it we realise that He is:
 - a) Holy – He is always perfect and always does right, and that He cannot tolerate sin.
 - b) Loving – He wants to live with His people and to be known and worshipped by them.
2. **To show the people the best way to live (Exodus 20:1-17 / Psalm 119:105).** The Law was an expression of God's love for His people and their love for Him. God did not give His Law to make life difficult for His people but to show them the best way to live and to protect them from the harmful results of sin. If the nation kept God's Law, their society would be just and fair for all people, and would shine to the other nations, showing them that God was the one true God.
3. **To teach people that they needed God's forgiveness for their sin (Romans 2:1-3:20).** The Law would keep the people from sin and harm by teaching them what was right and wrong. In this sense the Law is a much more accurate and sensitive guide than the conscience – it makes us aware of sin to a degree that we would not otherwise be (see Romans 7:7). This was the ultimate purpose of the Law. When the people compared their actions with the Law they would realise that they fell short of God's standard and that they needed God to forgive them for their sins. No one can fully obey the Law because we have inherited the principle of sin, which corrupts our whole being. The Law also shows us that sin cannot be ignored, and that it can only be forgiven on the basis of a sacrifice. The system of sacrifices was given to teach the people that forgiveness could only be given on the basis of the death of a sacrifice in their place.

The functions of the Law can be illustrated by the functions of a car indicator lights:

- i. To show which way to go (indicator)
- ii. To warn us when we've gone wrong (hazard warning)
- iii. To signal for help when we've broken down!

The Law was never supposed to be the engine or the fuel to get you where you needed to go or the mechanic who could repair you when you were broken down. The Law is powerless to save or to change a person. That is the role of God, the one to whom the Law was intended to lead us. The Law was always intended to be met with the correct attitude of heart. See for example Micah 6:8:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Salvation in the Old Testament was through faith in God as Saviour (see Paul's teaching in Romans 4). This is why the sacrificial system was part of the Law given to Israel. It was meant to show the people that they needed to depend on God to forgive their sins. Although they may not understand how a sacrifice could deal with sin (in fact animal sacrifices could not – they simply pointed forward to Christ's perfect sacrifice – Hebrews 10:4) they were supposed to depend in faith on God to deliver them. Ultimately, the Law should prepare the people of Israel for Christ, who was God's promised Saviour. Paul uses the image of a schoolmaster to describe the Law's function in preparing us for Christ. It taught us our sinfulness and our need of forgiveness, so that when Christ arrived we could put our trust in Him to save (see Galatians 3:24-25).

A Christian view of the Law

How then should Christians relate to the Law? This is a big topic, and one which we cannot cover in this study, but we can say a few things. Firstly, it would be wrong to suggest that the Law has no significance for Christians. The whole Law is the eternal Word of God (5:18) and therefore it still applies to us in some way. However, as with everything, the Law must be seen through the lens of Christ. Firstly, for Christians the civil aspect of the Law no longer applies, as we are not part of the national and political entity to which it was given, the nation of Israel. We are to be subject to the laws of the nation we live in (see Romans 13 for example). Secondly, some aspects of the Law were signs pointing to Christ, and their meaning has been fulfilled in Him. This is particularly true of the ceremonial laws about dietary requirements, sacrifices, festivals, the Temple and the priesthood. The New Testament is clear that because these pictures have found their fulfilment in Jesus, those who believe in Him are no longer required to follow their requirements. I believe that this also applies to the practice of the Sabbath as a specific day of the week (which was a requirement for the nation of Israel), although the principle of Sabbath rest (making one day in which we rest from work to focus on God) predates the Law and is still important for us. In Colossians 2:16, Paul forbids

believers from judging others because they do not observe the Sabbath Day, showing that Christians are not commanded by God to set one particular day of the week as a day of rest. Although there may be good arguments in favour of a day of rest for a society as a whole (allowing families to be together, creating a space away from materialism as well as providing the opportunity for religious groups to meet), there is no New Testament command requiring Christians to make Sundays a "Christian Sabbath". Clearly, then, the civil and ceremonial aspects of the Law apply to Christians in a different way than they did to the people of Israel. Their primary use for us is that they help us to understand the significance of Christ's role as priest and sacrifice.

So, if the civil law and the ceremonial law no longer apply to Christian believers, what about the moral law? Are we free to ignore it as well? This question is at the heart of our understanding of Jesus' teaching in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, and will be answered as we look at His words. We can, however, summarise our answer by saying that for Christians the moral law serves exactly the same function as it did for the people of Israel – to teach us right and wrong, to show us our sinfulness and to lead us to a response of repentance and faith towards God. The great differences for us as Christians are that we understand how God is able to rescue us from sin, through Christ, and we have the indwelling Spirit of God who empowers us to live according to God's will. The Christian life is about internal transformation by the Spirit so that we become people who by nature do what is right and avoid what is wrong (in other words who keep the Law by nature). This idea is seen in the promise of the New Covenant that God would write His laws not on stone tables but on our hearts (a picture of the Spirit's work – see Hebrews 8:10) and in Paul's teaching in Galatians 5:22-23 that those who follow the Spirit will manifest His fruit in the character, and that there is no law against these qualities or the actions that flow from them. The Spirit, however, is not in conflict with the Law. Rather, He uses the words of the Law to teach us. God's truth is His truth, and it is through truth that the Spirit challenges us and changes us. He is even called the Spirit of truth. Romans 8:4 speaks of this process, using the same Greek word (translated "fully met" in the NIV) to describe our fulfilment of the Law's requirements that Matthew 5:17 uses of Jesus fulfilling the Law:

in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

So, as we read the Old Testament Law, when considering how to apply it we must firstly ask whether or not it is part of God's timeless moral standard. One way to be certain of this is to see whether or not it is repeated in the New Testament. In fact, all of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament as standards for Christians with the exception of the fourth commandment, about the Sabbath Day:

- 1st Commandment – no other god but Yahweh – referred to by Jesus in Matthew 4:10
- 2nd Commandment – no idols to be made – John warns against idols in I John 5:21
- 3rd Commandment – God's name not to be taken in vain – Paul warns against blasphemy against God's name in I Timothy 6:1
- 5th Commandment – honour for parents – quoted by Jesus in Matthew 19:19 and by Paul in Ephesians 6:1-3
- 6th Commandment – against murder – quoted by Paul in Romans 13:9
- 7th Commandment – against adultery – quoted by Paul in Romans 13:9
- 8th Commandment – against theft – quoted by Paul in Romans 13:9
- 9th Commandment – against false testimony – quoted by Paul in Romans 13:9
- 10th Commandment – against coveting – quoted by Paul in Romans 13:9

Therefore these commandments remain relevant to us as indicators of what it means to live a life of true love for God and for our neighbour. So, then, let us turn to Matthew 5 and consider how Jesus relates to the Law.

Christ and the Law (v17-20)

Christ's approach to the Law in Matthew 5 is remarkable. On one hand He un-categorically upheld the authority of the Law in v17-19 in several ways:

- **He does not intend to abolish the Law and Prophets but to fulfil them** (v17). He sees no conflict between His teaching and the Law.
- **He claimed that nothing would be lost from the Law and Prophets until it was accomplished** (v18) – His statement that not even the tiniest letter would disappear from the Law shows that He believed in verbal inspiration of Scripture; that the words themselves were given by God, not simply the concepts or ideas.

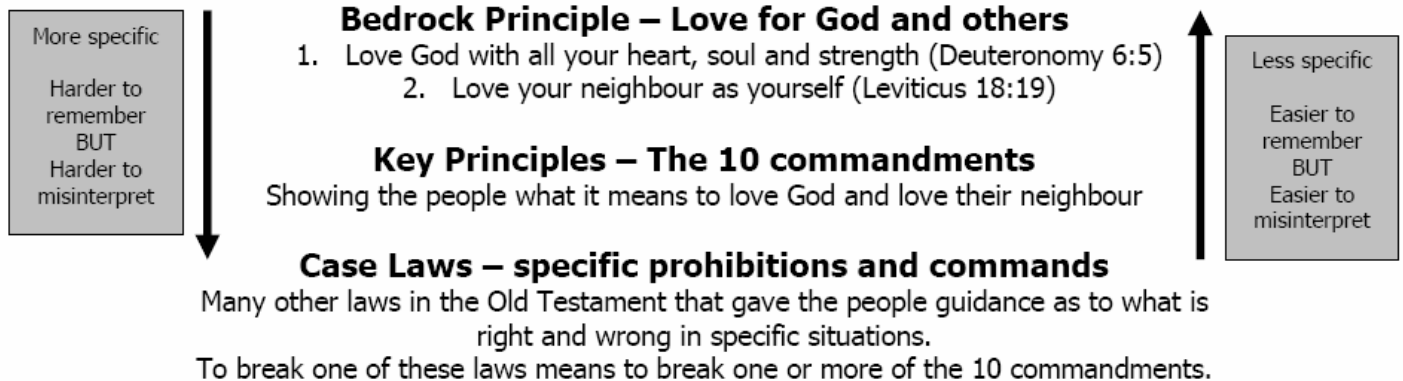
- **The position of people in the Kingdom of Heaven will depend on whether or not they keep the Law's commands and teach them to others (v19)**

On the other hand, Jesus claimed a remarkable degree of authority for Himself. Even to make a statement like v17 implies that Jesus believed He had remarkable authority to abolish or to fulfil the Law. It is as if He sees Himself as greater than the Law, not subject to it. The same is true of how he speaks about the various commandments he examines in v21-48. The Scribes and Pharisees never claimed any authority for themselves. In debates they were always careful to quote past Rabbis. Even the prophets of the Old Testament were careful to attribute the authority of their words to the fact that God had given them ("Thus says the Lord"). Christ, however, spoke with real authority. He repeatedly says in this passage "but I say to you," and doesn't depend on a reference to any other Rabbi to support His statements. The people recognised this authority (7:28-29), and marvelled at it. Who did Jesus think He was? How could He claim such authority to be the definitive interpreter of God's Law? These questions will be answered later in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He was (see Matthew 16:13 forward).

Although the Law contains several hundred rules (the Rabbis identified 613 distinct commandments, or *mitzvot*, in the *Torah*, including 365 "negative" commands to avoid certain behaviour and 248 "positive" commands to perform certain actions), Jesus taught that it could be summarised in two simple principles (Matthew 22:34-40):

- "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)
- "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18)

So, according to Jesus, **the basis of the Law is love for God and for others**. The rules contained in the Law were designed to teach the people what it would mean in practice to live out these two principles. The Ten Commandments are a summary of the Law, and they contain four rules showing us how to love God and six rules showing us how to love others. The Ten Commandments flesh out the meaning of love for God and for our neighbour in broad principles, and the rest of the Law gives specific examples of how that should be worked out. The following diagram describes this relationship pictorially:



What, then, does Christ mean when He says that He has come to fulfil the Law (5:17)? The Greek word is *pleroo*, and literally means to make replete or to complete, and I believe it encompasses three meanings:

- In His teaching He RESTORED its true meaning** (which had been distorted by the Scribes) – He showed that love for God and for our neighbour is at the heart of the Law (Matthew 22:24-40) and in the passage under consideration in this study He showed how the traditional interpretations of the law had sold its full meaning short.
- In His life He OBEYED it perfectly** – He demonstrated true Law-keeping in every aspect of His life. On occasions he was accused by His enemies of breaking the Law, especially about the Sabbath Day, but on examination of the passages in question it is evident that what He rejected was not the law of God but the traditional interpretations of it.
- In His death He COMPLETED its demands, prophecies and pictures** – the death of Christ as a perfect sacrifice for sin fulfilled the prophecies and types of the Law, in particular the offerings for sin. In

addition, His death met God's requirement for sin to be punished and makes it possible for those who trust in Him to be declared right with God (justified – see Romans 3:21-31).

Introduction to Jesus' six "worked examples"

Six examples fill remainder of the chapter. These six passages are often called "antitheses" (e.g. by John Stott) because of the formula "You have heard... but I tell you". It must be noted that Jesus is interacting here not simply with Mosaic Law, but with the oral traditions of the elders. Perhaps they are not so much antitheses, but rather (as Rob Warner calls them) "Messianic intensifications", since Christ actually intensifies the Law's demands beyond the letter to the spirit. I prefer, however, to call them **restorations** of the heart of the Law since I believe that what Jesus was ultimately doing was restoring both the true meaning of the Law and also the purpose for which it was given. The six examples cover different Old Testament Laws, about:

1. Murder (v21-26)
2. Adultery (v27-30)
3. Divorce (v31-32)
4. Oaths (v33-37)
5. Revenge (v38-42)
6. Love (v43-47)

In each of these examples there is a pattern:

- 1) **Jesus states the traditional interpretation of an Old Testament law ("You have heard it said ...")** – it is important to understand that He is quoting the Law as taught by the Scribes, not the actual Old Testament law. In some cases (e.g. about adultery) there is basically no difference between what Jesus quotes and the original law, while in others the traditional teaching He quotes is a fair summary of Old Testament principles (e.g. in the case of oaths), and in others (especially about love) the Old Testament law has been mutilated by the removal of one phrase and the addition of a completely new phrase.
- 2) **Jesus restores the Law to its original meaning ("But I tell you ...")** – when Jesus says "but I tell you", He is not disagreeing with the Law of Moses, but with the traditional interpretation of it. He is taking us back to the original intention of the Old Testament law. He is not attempting to replace, or even to intensify that law, but to emphasise that the letter of the law was to be taken seriously (not explained away) and more than this, that it was supposed to lead the hearer to reflect and to lead them towards the heart of the law which was a consistent love for God and for their neighbour.
- 3) **Illustration(s)** – with the exception of the third and fourth examples, Jesus uses illustrations to emphasise what he is teaching.

I have described these as "worked examples" because Jesus is not attempting to exhaust the possible examples of the distortion of the Law by the Scribes, but to demonstrate how they had missed its point. The Table at the end of the Appendix summarises the six worked examples and the lessons we can learn from them. In several cases Matthew records more detail about Christ's teaching on the issue later in his Gospel. In these cases I have indicated which other passage should be considered.

As we look at these six examples, we can see three major ways in which the traditional interpretation of the rabbis had corrupted the Law's meaning:

- a) In the first two examples (murder and adultery), the corruption was that **the attitude of heart had been ignored**. These are classic examples of how the Scribes had obeyed the letter of the Law but had failed to follow it to its heart and to realise the call of the Law to love God and others in every respect.
- b) In the third and fourth examples (divorce and oaths), the corruption was **the creation of a loophole to escape the Law's demands**. This seems ironic when we consider that one of the Scribes' intentions had been the "hedge around the Law". In actual fact, in these two examples what they had done was to find ways out of the Law's demands when it did not suit them. There are at least two other examples of this approach in the Gospels:

- i. Matthew 15:4-6 – the law said that we should honour our parents (Exodus 20:12), and this should include caring for them in their old age. The Scribes had created a loophole by saying that if money was dedicated to God (which didn't necessarily mean actually handing it over to the Temple) that money no longer had to be used to support one's parents in their later years.
 - ii. Matthew 23:16 – this passage is connected with the issue of oaths, and we will return to it when we examine what Jesus says about oaths in this passage.
- c) In the final two examples (revenge and love), the corruption was in the distortion of the Law either by wrong application (revenge) or by adding to it and removing from it (love)

Example 1 – Murder (v21-26) [see also Matthew 18:15-35]

Original Law – Exodus 20:13 (6th commandment) – this commandment is quoted accurately in the traditional teaching, but the phrase “and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement” is added. This phrase is not found in the Old Testament, but is an accurate reflection of the Old Testament position.

Christ restores the Law by showing that anger is as bad murder. In Greek there are two distinct words for anger:

- a) *Thumos* – anger that flares up in reaction to provocation
- b) *Orgē* – burning anger that festers in the heart as a grudge against another person

It is the second type of anger that Jesus speaks of here and equates with murder (the verb translated “is angry with” is *orgizesthai*). The problem with this kind of anger is that it destroys the person who harbours it and eventually can no longer be contained. Jesus pictures this burning anger erupting in insulting speech about its object. The insults are in two grades of severity:

- a) *Raca* – John Stott writes that: “It appears that ‘Raca’ is an insult to a person’s intelligence, calling him ‘empty-headed’, and commentators vie with one another in proposing English parallels like ‘nitwit’, ‘blockhead, numskull’ or ‘bonehead’”. The meaning of the insult apparently depends more on the tone of voice as well as the meaning of the word – perhaps like the word “loser” in current usage. The insult here is to the person’s intelligence.
- b) *More* (“fool”) – is the root of our English word *moron*, but means more than just deficient in intelligence. In Hebrew usage the word “fool” meant someone who was morally deficient – basically someone who was deserving of God’s judgement. This is clear in the first verses of both Psalm 14 and Psalm 53, which define a fool as someone who denies God

The punishment is also progressive, with the first insult being answerable to the human authority of the Sanhedrin, but the second being deserving of “the fire of hell”. Some commentators have tried to play down the strength of this statement by pointing out that Jesus uses the word *gehenna*, and that this may not mean “hell” but simply “the rubbish tip”. It is correct that the word *gehenna* is derived from the place name of the Valley of Hinnom, which was a valley outside Jerusalem where rubbish was dumped and burned. However, the word later came to mean the place where God would judge sinners, and it is clear from Matthew 10:28 that Jesus uses *gehenna* in this sense since He warns that body and soul can be destroyed there. In other words, the NIV is right to use the word “hell” in this verse. Ironically, the person who is effectively declaring his brother deserving of God’s judgement in hell by calling him a fool is actually putting himself in danger of hell! He is declaring himself to be a fool.

Interestingly, in Matthew 23:17 we read that Jesus calls the Pharisees “blind fools” (Greek *more*). This may appear to contradict His teaching here earlier in the same Gospel. Perhaps the answer to this seeming contradiction is that Christ was the only person who was actually qualified to make this kind of judgement about a person’s character. He knew the hearts of the Pharisees and could justly declare them to be morally deficient. We are not qualified to judge in this way (an idea to which Jesus returns later in the Sermon on the Mount – see 7:1-5).

In the film *Minority Report* a system is devised under which murders can be accurately predicted and the intended perpetrators arrested before they are able to commit the crime. Imagine if a system that could read our minds and that followed Christ’s standard was taken? Surely everyone would end up in prison, for who of us has not been guilty of anger against another person? We may not kill a person’s body, but our words, spoken from anger, may kill their heart, their reputation or their confidence.

Illustrations

In this case Jesus uses two “mini-parables” to further develop His teaching. In fact these are more direct than parables usually are as Jesus makes the hearer the subject of the story. In the first illustration (v23-24) the hearer is bringing their offering to God when they realise that they have wronged their brother. They should leave their offering, go and be reconciled with their brother and then return and make their offering. This story illustrates the urgency of sin – when we realise we have sinned we must put it right as soon as possible. It also shows that God is not impressed by religious activities if we have sin in our lives that we have not dealt with. Reconciliation between brothers is of great value in God’s Kingdom, and peacemakers are blessed (5:9). Jesus spoke at more length in chapter 18 of Matthew about reconciliation between brothers, including a pattern of how we should deal with a brother who refuses to repent. Perhaps the urgency is not simply because of the effect of our sin on oneself, but also (in the context of Jesus warning about grudges) because of the effect of our sin on the person we have wronged. We have a responsibility to rescue them from the anger that may grip their heart in response to our unrepentant attitude. In the second story, about a debt that is owed to an enemy, the emphasis is also on the urgency of putting our wrongs right. It makes sense to pay off a debt out of court rather than waiting until we receive a penalty from the judge. Sin must be taken seriously and dealt with quickly. It is worth noting that the standard is the same whether the person we have wronged is our “brother” (a fellow believer) or our enemy. Jesus will not allow for any different attitude to outsiders – righteousness means right behaviour towards all people. This same point will be made even more forcibly in the sixth example.

Example 2 – Adultery (v27-30) [see also Matthew 15:10-20]

Original Law – Exodus 20:14 (7th commandment) – this commandment was quoted accurately in the traditional interpretation mentioned by Jesus. This law had, therefore, been preserved intact in the tradition of the elders. It was, however, corrupted in the same way as the law about murder.

Christ restores the Law by saying that lustful thoughts are as bad as the physical act of adultery. He intensifies the Law to include the inner life as well as the actions. The Law was always supposed to lead people to reflect and to examine their heart, so discovering the true extent of their sinfulness.

Illustration

Jesus proceeds to use a graphic image to emphasise the seriousness of sin. If our eye or hand causes us to sin we should cut it off or gouge it out. Jesus did not intend this mutilation of the body to be taken literally (there is no evidence of any of the apostles applying it literally). Sadly, church history contains examples of people who did just that. Perhaps the most famous was Origen, who castrated himself in 2nd Century in an attempt to deal with lust. He was not alone in that period of history, as the Council of Nicea in 325 had to explicitly ban this kind of behaviour. It is not so much that the eye causes sin or is sinful, rather Jesus places the blame on the way we look at the woman (v28, lustfully – *epithumeo* – meaning to set the heart on / covet / desire / long for / lust after). The problem is not with the body but with the heart. The eye or hand simply provides the opportunity for sinful desires to express themselves (see Jesus’ statement in 15:10-20). but to emphasise seriousness of sin (also in 18:8-9). Jesus is challenging us to be ruthless with sin in our lives and to take drastic actions to control it by avoiding temptation. Perhaps Christ intends a parallel between the reference to an eye in this passage and the “eye for an eye” of v38. If this is so, the point is that we should be ruthless with sin in our own lives but ready to forgive those who sin against us. This would tie in well with Jesus’ teaching in 7:3-5 about removing the plank in our own eye before we remove the speck from our brother’s.

The problem with lust is that it degrades us and it degrades the object of the lust – objectifying them. The issue with use of pornography is the same – it degrades our minds, it celebrates sinful behaviour and it lacks love and respect for the people involved. Furthermore, use of pornography normalises the behaviour we see in our own minds (so lessening our sensitivity to sin) and creates a barrier between God and us as well as harming our relationships with people of the other sex (either present or future). For all of these reasons, we must be ruthless and gouge pornography out of our lives. The same applies to sexual humour or themes in non-pornographic films and television programmes.

Example 3 – Divorce (v31-32) [see also 19:1-12]

Original Law – Deuteronomy 24:1 – in the traditional rendering quoted by Jesus this verse is misrepresented as a command from Moses. In fact, in Deuteronomy 24 Moses was simply describing the process of divorce by way of explaining that a couple cannot remarry after they have been divorced and the woman has married another man, even if her second husband dies or divorces her. In Jewish practice (according to William Barclay) this came to mean that a man only had to sign a certificate and to hand it to his wife in the presence of two witnesses for the divorce to take effect. Two leading Rabbis who were contemporaries of Jesus took differing views on divorce (among other issues):

- *Shammai* (c. 50 BC to 10 AD) took a strict view that only adultery was a basis for divorce. He said, “Let a wife be as mischievous as the wife of Ahab, she cannot be divorced except for adultery”.
- *Hillel the elder* (c. 110 BC to 10 AD) took a much more permissive line. He taught that a man could divorce his wife for a wide range of reasons including burning or adding too much salt to his dinner, having her head uncovered in public, talking with men in the streets, brawling, speaking disrespectfully of her husband’s parents in his presence, being troublesome or quarrelsome. According to another Rabbi in Hillel’s school, Akiba (c. 50-135 AD), a man could divorce his wife even if he found a woman whom he found more attractive to him.

It seems that Hillel’s view prevailed at the time of Jesus, and so divorce was widely available to Jewish men.

Christ restores the Law – Jesus’ meaning hinges on the meaning of the Greek word *porneia* – translated in the NIV as “marital unfaithfulness” (also in Matthew 19:9). This word is normally translated “fornication” but three different interpretations of its meaning in this verse have been proposed:

- a) Some claim that since Jesus says fornication rather than adultery, He is referring to the discovery that the woman was not a virgin before she was married. These people do not permit divorce under any circumstances so long as the couple were both virgins at the time of marriage.
- b) Some say that the meaning is broader than just sexual sin, and can mean any rejection of the marriage vows. They tend to permit divorce in any circumstance where the marriage has broken down intractably.
- c) Some stick to the general meaning of the word as fornication. They claim that only sexual sin can dissolve a marriage because it is uniting oneself with another person. In fact, under the Old Testament Law the punishment for adultery was the death penalty, so in cases of adultery that were discovered the marriage would definitely have been dissolved by the death of one partner.

I believe that the first view does not fit with the context of the contemporary debate about divorce, and that the second view does not fit here with the pattern in all of these examples of Jesus intensifying the traditional watered-down interpretation of the Law. I maintain that Jesus was prohibiting divorce except in the case of sexual immorality by one partner. Other issues may be grounds for separation, but not divorce. Note that Jesus is more interested in preserving the marriage relationship than the issue of divorce. Divorce is a concession (19:8), not something that is expected or part of God’s perfect intention for us. God “hates divorce” (Malachi 2:16), and it was never part of His perfect plan for human relationships. We must, however, be careful about making divorce into a separate category of “unforgivable sin”. Scripture is clear that the innocent party in a divorce is free to re-marry, and (as with any sin) where the guilty party has come to a position of repentance and of acceptance of the Biblical teaching on divorce they should also be permitted to re-marry.

Example 4 – Oaths (v33-37) [see also Matthew 23:16-22]

Original Law – the words quoted by Jesus are not found in the Old Testament, but do distil Old Testament principles about the importance of truthfulness and keeping oaths (see Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2). Matthew 23:16-22 sheds more light on the meaning of the corruption of God’s Law by the Scribes as it reveals that the Pharisees had devised a way of avoiding oath-keeping. If they swore by God then their oath was binding, but if they swore by something less (e.g. by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or their head) then it was not necessarily binding. The concept was that if God was mentioned He was a partner to the transaction, but if He wasn’t mentioned He was not.

Jesus restores the Law by saying that our word must be binding and that a simple yes or no should suffice. The Pharisees’ approach denied the sovereignty of God and His omnipresence. We cannot separate

life neatly into two areas, the sacred and the profane, as if God can be excluded from some parts of life. God sees and knows everything we say, do and think, and He expects integrity from us – the same standard of truthfulness in every part of life. Jesus is not necessarily saying that Christians must never take an oath (e.g. in court). In fact, Paul used oaths (“as the Lord is my witness” – II Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 1:20) to emphasise the truthfulness of his words. Sometimes in a fallen world we need to emphasise our truthfulness to others because of their tendency to distrust us. If we do use an oath (or make a promise), it should not be because we will only be bound if we do but because others need to be convinced! As far as we are concerned it should be immaterial what form of words we use – our word should be honest and trustworthy through and through. Furthermore, we should be the same in every aspect of life, recognising that God is Lord of all.

Example 5 – Revenge (v38-42)

Original Law – the principle “an eye for an eye” is contained three times in the Old Testament Law (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21), and is accurately represented in Jesus’ quotation of the tradition of the elders. This principle is known as the *Lex talionis* (or “law of retaliation”) and is often condemned as bloodthirsty and barbaric. We must, however, realise that:

- a) It was actually intended to limit retribution for a crime to a fair degree which matched the seriousness of the crime (neither too harsh nor too lenient).
- b) It was not necessarily intended to be enforced literally, and by Jesus’ time there was a system of fines instead of actual mutilation. The important point was that the punishment should fit the crime, not that it should necessarily be an exact replication of the original offence.
- c) It was intended to govern the workings of judges in the civil courts of Israel (see Deuteronomy 19:18 for example), but not to be used by individuals to justify retaliation against anyone who wronged them. The Pharisees had clearly wrongly carried this principle over into the realms of personal revenge. In fact, the Old Testament Law demanded mercy for others (see Leviticus 19:18 for example), and this principle is upheld in the Old Testament Wisdom literature (Proverbs 25:21; 24:29).

So, the corruption of this principle from the Law was in its application to the wrong sphere of life.

Jesus restores the law to its proper place by saying that we must not retaliate at all. We should not resist an evil person (v39). He is leading us to the heart of the Law which was supposed to be about understanding and applying God’s mercy. The force of Jesus’ teaching will become clear when we consider the illustrations he uses.

We must be careful not to reverse the process and fall into the reverse of the Pharisee’s mistake by applying the principle of non-retaliation to the State. The authorities have the right and responsibility to punish wrongdoers. In Romans 12-13, Paul maintains this same balance between interpersonal non-retaliation (12:17-21) and the State exercising authority to judge (13:1-5).

Illustrations

Jesus uses three pictures to describe how we should respond to wrongs against us. They are amongst the most famous, provocative and controversial words of Jesus:

- (i) *Turn the other cheek* (v39) – if a person hit another person on the right cheek with their right hand it presumably meant they had used the back of their hand to inflict the blow. In the culture of the time this was apparently highly contemptuous and demeaning (according to William Barclay Jewish law said that a hit with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as hitting with the palm of the hand). Jesus says even if a person insults us to this degree we should not retaliate but rather should respond by offering them our left cheek.
- (ii) *Give your cloak* (v40) – if a person sues you for your tunic (the inner garment, which even poor people would have owned more than one of) you should offer them your cloak (the heavier outer garment that most people would have owned only one of) as well. Under the Old Testament Law, people were actually forbidden from taking a man’s cloak for more than part of a day in a pledge (Exodus 22:26-27). Jesus is again challenging us to go beyond the demands of the law and to overcome evil with good.

- (iii) *Go the extra mile* (v41) – if someone (presumably a Roman soldier in the occupation of Palestine) forces you to carry a load for one mile, you should offer to carry it for two. Again the idea is that you go beyond what is expected and so overcome evil with good.

It must be noted here that Jesus is not trying to justify any of the behaviours that are forced on the person here – the hit on the cheek, the suing for one's tunic or the forcing to carry a load. These are all portrayed as the actions of an evil man. Christ is not blurring the boundaries between good and evil or justifying abuse of others, but He is teaching that evil cannot be overcome with evil (two wrongs do not make a right) and that it must rather be overcome with good. The principle is not simply one of non-retaliation, but of positive good towards those who have done wrong. In v42 Jesus extends this principle to every situation where someone asks us for something. Again this is a restoration of the intention of the Old Testament Law, which set a high standard for giving and lending (see Deuteronomy 15:7-11). Underlying this whole passage is the principle that a Christian should be more concerned with his responsibilities than his rights. Our greatest responsibility is to demonstrate to others what God is like and what life in His Kingdom is like. A believer will see every situation as a God-given opportunity to turn the world upside down by overcoming evil with good.

Example 6 – Love (v43-47)

Original Law – Leviticus 19:18 – of all of Jesus' examples this law has been most distorted by the Scribes. They had removed the words "as yourself", limiting the extent of the command, but worse still they had added the phrase "and hate your enemy", which was found nowhere in the Old Testament Law. This command to hate one's enemies was an addition by the Scribes that limited the requirement to love to only those from within Israel and indeed only to others who were as strict about the Law as they were..

Jesus restores the Law to love our neighbour by explaining that it applies even to our enemies. This is the same point that He made through the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which redefined the traditional understanding of a "neighbour" to show that it includes all people, including those who would naturally be our enemies (Luke 10). The word translated "love" is *agapē*, which means a decision of the will to do good towards the person. We are commanded to pray for our enemies. Love and prayer go hand in hand. Because we decide to love the person, we pray for them, and through prayer we discover the strength to love them as we should. By doing so, we demonstrate the family likeness of sons of God who blesses all people whether good or bad. In other words, we become peacemakers, who will be called the sons of God (5:9). Peacemakers seek reconciliation and desire to see their enemy restored with God and with them. This is an extension of the idea of overcoming evil with good (see also Romans 12:20-21).

Illustration

Jesus speaks of the fact that even tax collectors and people of other religions love those who are like them. God is different because He blesses the good and evil alike with sunshine and rain. It is normal and natural to love those who love you. Christian love is only really demonstrated in love for those who are not naturally lovable to us. It is a reflection of the *agapē* of God, which was ultimately shown to us sinners through the cross of Christ (Romans 5:8). It is the "more than others" (Gk. *perisson*) that marks out followers of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in *The Cost of Discipleship*) wrote that one of the primary aspects of the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' teaching on the *perisson*:

What makes the Christian different from other men is the '*peculiar*', the *perisson*, the 'extraordinary', the 'unusual', that which is not 'a matter of course'. ... It is 'the more', the 'beyond-all-that'. ... For him [Jesus] the hall-mark of the Christian is the 'extraordinary'. The Christian cannot live at the world's level, because he must always remember the *perisson*.

If the Christian life begins with the "more than others", how is my life measured? Sadly, often churches become comfortable places where we are together with people from the same culture as us. We narrow down into groups of uniform personality type, socio-economic group, age group, marital status, ethnic background, theological perspective and political view. How tragic! How can a narrow group like that ever truly represent the Kingdom of God? Where is the room for the "more than others"?

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48)

In every example that Jesus examines, the *Tradition of the Elders* had sold the Law short by limiting it to specific actions rather than following its spirit and applying the heart of the Law, which is love:

- So long as they didn't take another person's life they thought they were alright, even if their hearts were full of anger and bitterness towards others and their words cut others down
- So long as they didn't sleep with a woman who wasn't their wife they thought they were alright, even if their minds were full of lustful thoughts
- So long as they gave their wives a certificate of divorce they thought they could walk away from the marriage commitment they had made to a faithful woman
- So long as they didn't use God's name in the vow they thought they could break whatever promise they had made
- So long as they had been wronged they thought they were justified in taking revenge personally rather than leaving it to the courts and that the wrongdoer deserved only retaliation from them
- So long as they showed love towards their fellow religious Jews they thought they were doing what was required and could ignore those they classed as their enemies

In short they didn't believe they had any responsibility to other people and especially not to those who were outside their own circle of "righteousness". Their standard of right was incredibly selfish and introspective. It was all about limiting the demands of the Law and freeing themselves from responsibility towards others.

The Scribes and Pharisees limited the demands of God's righteousness in three ways:

- a) Limiting it to external actions and ignoring internal attitudes** – as a result they missed the fact that sin is not just about the wrong we do, but about the impurity within us. They believed that wrong actions made a person impure, but Jesus corrected them by saying that impurity actually comes out from a man's heart (Matthew 15:16-20). It is because our hearts are sinful that we commit sin.
- b) Limiting it to "religious activities" and practicing a double standard in other areas of life** – this is seen in the example about oaths, where God was only considered to be a partner in oaths that specifically used His name, and in the story about being reconciled to a brother, which implies that someone could make sacrifices before God when their heart was not right with their brother. God sees every part of our lives, and He desires righteousness that is consistent throughout every part of life. There can be no "sacred-secular" divide in Christian living – every moment must be sacred, dedicated to God. How I act in my home or workplace is just as important to Him as how I behave in church.
- c) Limiting these actions to those they believed to be "deserving" and excluding "outsiders"** – as a result they missed the fact that sin is not just about the wrong we do, but the good we fail to do. They also taught others that they could not be part of the Kingdom. In fact, one of Jesus' most scathing criticisms of the Pharisees – that they were not only outside the Kingdom themselves but they were trying to shut the door to stop others getting in by their judgmental attitude to those they classed as sinners (see Matthew 23:13). Perhaps this is why Jesus is not only concerned that we obey these commandments but that we teach others to do so (v19). Whether we realise it or not, we are always teaching others through our attitudes, actions and words. If we claim to be a follower of Jesus, we are teaching people what He is like and how he thinks of them. We must ask ourselves what we teach other people (our spouse, our children, our work colleagues or our fellow road users for example) about God and His Kingdom by our attitudes and actions.

The result was that the Pharisees believed themselves to be righteous before God and they severely underestimated the amount of sin in their lives. It was as if they had tried to make God's righteousness into something manageable. They couldn't face up to just how pure, how glorious, how utterly perfect it was! As a result, they didn't realise just how poor in spirit they really were – how far they fell short of God's standard of perfection (His "glory" as Paul called it in Romans 3:23)! **Jesus, however, restores the Law to its correct role, which is to lead us to a place of humble repentance towards God, to keep us in dependence upon His mercy and forgiveness, and to lead us to sacrificial love for Him and for others.** After all, one of the purposes of the Law was to reflect the character of God, and so Jesus finishes this section of the Sermon with a remarkable statement:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect

There is no room for compromise in that statement. No loopholes. No get out of jail free card. No excuses. God's standard is nothing less than perfect. Suddenly we realise just how much trouble we're in, and just how much we need to be rescued!

Conclusion – perfect righteousness

The command to be "perfect" undoubtedly links back to Jesus' statement in v20 about a righteousness that surpasses the Scribes and Pharisees. The standard of righteousness in God's Kingdom is to be *perfect* as our Father is perfect. This statement echoes the Old Testament call to "be holy as I am holy", which is a refrain repeated five times in Leviticus (11:44; 11:45; 19:2; 20:7; 20:26) and which is also quoted in I Peter 1:16. The allusion would not have been lost on Jesus' listeners who were familiar with the Old Testament. The problem was that the Scribes had lessened the meaning of "holy" to something they could cope with. Jesus restores it to its full extent by using the word "perfect".

The word translated "perfect" is *teleios*. It means mature or complete. William Barclay, in his commentary on Matthew, explains its meaning well:

It has nothing to do with what we might call abstract, philosophical, metaphysical perfection. A victim which is fit for a sacrifice to God, that is a victim which is without blemish, is *teleios*. A man who has reached his full-grown stature is *teleios* in contradiction to a half-grown lad. A student who has reached a mature knowledge of his subject is *teleios* as opposed to a learner who is just beginning, and who as yet has no grasp of things. To put it another way, the Greek idea of perfection is *functional*. A thing is perfect if it fully realizes the purpose for which it was planned, and designed, and made. In point of fact, that meaning is involved in the derivation of the word. *Teleios* is the adjective formed from the noun *telos*. *Telos* means an *end*, a *purpose*, an *aim*, a *goal*. A thing is *teleios* if it realizes the purpose for which it was planned; a man is perfect if he realizes the purpose for which he was created

The ultimate purpose for which we are created is to be like God – to reflect His character and to live in relationship with Him; to be transformed into His likeness – and in so being to show others what He is like! This was part of God's purpose for the nation of Israel too, but one in which they repeatedly failed because they limited the Law's demands to be all about them and God. They failed to fulfil their responsibility to witness to the rest of the world. The book of Jonah is a powerful and tragic example of this attitude, as are the Pharisees, who even failed to recognise their responsibility to bring Jews who they deemed to be "sinners" into the blessing of God's mercy, never mind those outside Israel who they counted as their "enemies" (the Samaritans and the Gentiles).

Jesus calls us to complete righteousness. A righteousness that is genuine because it flows from the inside of our being outwards to others. A righteousness that is complete because it does not fall short by picking and choosing who will benefit from it. A righteousness that starts with the humble faith in God that the Beatitudes call us to and that expresses itself in good deeds that shine out to a world that needs to know about God (5:13-16). To be complete in righteousness includes being complete:

- in self-control and humility (v21-26)
- in purity (v27-30)
- in faithfulness (v31-32)
- in honesty (v33-37)
- in forgiveness (v38-42)
- in love (v43-47)

Notice the parallel with many of the qualities described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 as the "fruit of the Spirit". No wonder Paul can say of these qualities that "against such things there is no law". Even the fruit metaphor is an echo of the Sermon on the Mount (7:16-20). The perfect righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees is produced in us as the Spirit leads us, empowers us and transforms us.

Perhaps you are still wondering how it could be possible to live up to this standard? Has anyone ever succeeded? There was one person who succeeded fully – Christ Himself. He demonstrated perfect righteousness in every respect. In particular, if we look at Christ's last three examples, we can see Him fulfilling them at the very end of His life on earth:

- a) *Oaths* – when He was on trial He spoke truthfully, letting His yes be yes
- b) *Revenge* – when He was mocked and beaten by soldiers, he did not retaliate
- c) *Love* – when He was crucified he prayed for those who nailed Him to the cross "Father forgive them"

Christ's fulfillment of the standard has become our perfect example, but more than that His fulfillment of the standard qualified Him to become the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He was made perfect (*teleios*) through suffering (Hebrews 2:10) and so was able to be the author of salvation. This certainly doesn't mean that something was lacking in Christ but that without the experience of the perfect life He lived and the suffering He endured, He became able to be our sacrifice and High Priest. Christ dealt with the problem of sin and took the penalty that we deserved. He fulfilled the Law's demands so that we can be made right with God. We stand perfect in Him. He became sin for us so that we can become God's righteousness (II Corinthians 5:21). Before God we stand righteous, not because of our own actions but because of Christ's death for us.

In addition to this, it is possible for us to become righteous in our own character and actions. How can this happen? Only through the relationship that this Sermon presupposes and calls us to – a relationship with God as His children. Jesus speaks of God as “your Father” 15 times in the Sermon on the Mount (in 5:16, 5:45, 5:48, 6:1, 6:4, 6:6 twice, 6:8, 6:14, 6:15, 6:18 twice, 6:26, 6:32 and 7:11). In addition, He teaches the disciples to pray “Our Father” in the Lord’s Prayer (6:9). Outside the Sermon “your Father” is rare – it appears twice in Matthew 10, once in Mark (11:25) and four times in Luke (6:36; 11:13; 12:30; 12:32). The issue of who is a child of God had been raised by John the Baptist earlier in Matthew 3:9, when he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees:

And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

John’s challenge then was to show fruit in keeping with repentance and he warned that the judgement was coming and that one was coming soon who would baptise people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus now speaks to His disciples as children of God. He has come to open up a new relationship with God and to transform people by baptising them in the Holy Spirit so that they become capable of true righteousness.

Is this relationship with God as Father real in your life? God cares about our hearts – He cannot be fooled and He is not interested in empty ritual or deeds that are intended to impress Him or others. You need simply to come to Him in humility and ask Him to forgive you on the basis of Christ’s death in your place. It is only by having righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees that we can enter the Kingdom of Heaven (v20). This is not the only statement that Christ made about entering the Kingdom. In fact He speaks 16 times in the Gospels about entering the Kingdom. These occurrences are listed in Part 3 of the Appendix, but their teaching can be summarised in the following statement:

to enter the Kingdom we must come to God in humility and repentance, be born again by the Holy Spirit, being made right before God so that we become people who by nature do His will.

To be born again through the Spirit of God (John 3:5) is necessary for us to begin to have righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees, and both are therefore necessary for us to enter the Kingdom.

If we are already in this relationship with God as Father then we need to deepen it. We must take sin seriously in our lives. Sin is a much bigger problem than we realise. It is not simply the wrong we do, but the right we fail to do. It is not simply the wrong actions we commit (sins) but the rebellious, arrogant selfishness of our hearts (sin). We don’t just need a morality that will keep us from doing wrong things, we need a Saviour who can rescue us from ourselves and can transform our hearts so that we both desire to and are able to do what is right. The biggest problem with sin is that it obscures our view of God (5:8) – it creates a barrier in our relationship with Him. We must seek reconciliation. We must pray for those who irritate or hurt us. We must follow the Spirit’s leading in everything and allow Him to produce His fruit in our lives (Gal 5:22).

More than this, we can become a community of believers in our local church who reflect the values of God’s Kingdom, and who live out perfect righteousness. We can be the people who have that something more – who are known for their love not only for one another but for those on the outside, and who greet not only their brothers and sisters but also the strangers in their midst.

The question I had to ask myself as I prepared for this teaching was do I really desire to become like this? Am I really hungry for righteousness? I am often, like the Pharisees, much better at seeming to care about righteousness in others, especially in their behaviour, but less bothered by impatience and loss of control in myself. I judge the actions of others and ignore the hardness that is in me. We need to stop trying to justify ourselves or wriggle out of our responsibilities. Must not try to limit own sinfulness or settle for less than perfect righteousness. May God teach us as we depend on Him and may His Spirit transform us!

APPENDIX

1. Gandhi on the Sermon on the Mount

Early in his life, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had been reading the Bible to keep a promise he had made to a friend. He found the Old Testament extremely difficult going. He disliked the Book of Numbers. But the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to his heart. The verses about not resisting evil but offering the other cheek and giving the cloak to one who asked for one's coat delighted him beyond measure. They reminded him about something he had learned in his childhood about returning with gladness good for evil done.

"I did once seriously think of embracing the Christian faith," Gandhi told Millie Polak, the wife of one of his earliest disciples. "The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek, I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man..."

However, on another occasion, he said he could accept Jesus "as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept."

"The message of Jesus as I understand it," said Gandhi, "is contained in the Sermon on the Mount unadulterated and taken as a whole... If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian.' But negatively I can tell you that in my humble opinion, what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount... I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the west."

2. 15 occurrences of “your Father” in the Sermon on the Mount

1. **5:16:** In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise **your Father** in heaven.
2. **5:45:** that you may be sons of **your Father** in heaven.
3. **5:48:** Be perfect, therefore, as **your** heavenly **Father** is perfect
4. **6:1:** "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from **your Father** in heaven.
5. **6:4:** so that your giving may be in secret. Then **your Father**, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
6. **6:6:** But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to **your Father**, who is unseen...
7. **6:6:** ... Then **your Father**, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
8. **6:8:** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
9. **6:14:** For if you forgive men when they sin against you, **your** heavenly **Father** will also forgive you.
10. **6:15:** But if you do not forgive men their sins, **your Father** will not forgive your sins.
11. **6:18:** so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to **your Father**, who is unseen;
...
12. **6:18:** ... and **your Father**, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
13. **6:26:** Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet **your** heavenly **Father** feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?
14. **6:32:** For the pagans run after all these things, and **your** heavenly **Father** knows that you need them.
15. **7:11:** If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will **your Father** in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

3. Jesus on entering the Kingdom

1. **Matthew 5:20:** For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not **enter** the **kingdom** of heaven.
2. **Matthew 7:21:** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will **enter** the **kingdom** of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.
3. **Matthew 18:3:** And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never **enter** the **kingdom** of heaven.
4. **Matthew 19:23:** Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to **enter** the **kingdom** of heaven.
5. **Matthew 19:24:** Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to **enter** the **kingdom** of God."
6. **Matthew 21:32:** Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are **entering** the **kingdom** of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.
7. **Matthew 23:13:** "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the **kingdom** of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not **enter**, nor will you let those **enter** who are trying to.
8. **Mark 9:47:** And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to **enter** the **kingdom** of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,
9. **Mark 10:15:** I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the **kingdom** of God like a little child will never **enter** it."
10. **Mark 10:23:** Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to **enter** the **kingdom** of God!"
11. **Mark 10:24:** The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to **enter** the **kingdom** of God!
12. **Mark 10:25:** It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to **enter** the **kingdom** of God."
13. **Luke 18:17:** I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the **kingdom** of God like a little child will never **enter** it."
14. **Luke 18:24:** Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to **enter** the **kingdom** of God!
15. **Luke 18:25:** Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to **enter** the **kingdom** of God."
16. **John 3:5:** Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can **enter** the **kingdom** of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Summary

To enter the Kingdom must:

- a) Have righteousness that surpasses the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20)
- b) Do the will of the Father (Matthew 7:21)
- c) Change and become like little children (Matthew 18:3)
- d) Repent (Matthew 21:32)
- e) Receive it like a little child (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17)
- f) Be born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5)

These six statements can be summarised in one:

to enter the Kingdom we must come to God in humility and repentance, be born again by the Holy Spirit, being made right before God so that we become people who by nature do His will.

Barriers to entering the Kingdom:

- (i) Being rich (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:23-25; Luke 18:24-25) – material possessions can so easily distract us from the Kingdom and keep us from faith in God
- (ii) Teachers who shut the door (Matthew 23:13) – the Pharisees had become barriers to others entering the Kingdom because of the distorted view of it they were presenting

4. Summary of Jesus' Six Worked Examples

Subject	Murder	Adultery	Divorce	Oaths	Revenge	Love
Verses	21-26	27-30	31-32	33-37	38-42	43-48
Original Law	Exodus 20:13 – correctly quoted	Exodus 20:14 – correctly quoted	Deuteronomy 24:1 – concession made into Law	No OT passage quoted but fairly summarises passages like Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12; Num 30:2	Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21 – quoted correctly	Leviticus 19:18, but phrase “as yourself” left out and “and hate your enemies” added
Core problem with tradition	Ignored the attitude of heart		Created a loophole to escape the Law’s demands		Distorted the Law either by wrong application or by addition or subtraction	
Jesus restores the Law	Anger is as serious as murder – it has three stages: a) Burning grudge b) Contempt (raca) c) Malice (“fool”)	Lustful thoughts are as serious as adultery.	Divorce is only permissible in cases of sexual unfaithfulness (<i>porneia</i>) – otherwise the woman and anyone she marries subsequently becomes an adulterer	Our word should be binding whatever formulation of words we use. A simple yes or no should be sufficient to bind us.	This principle was intended for the law courts, not to be applied to personal grievances. We are to overcome evil with good by not resisting evil people.	The command to love our neighbour means that we must love our enemies as well.
Illustration(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Brother you wronged – be reconciled before bringing offering o Adversary taking you to court – pay your debt before you even reach court 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o If eye causes to sin gouge it out o If hand causes to sin, cut it off <p>It is better to lose one part of the body than for the whole body to be thrown into Hell.</p>	NONE	NONE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Turn the other cheek o Give away our cloak as well as our tunic o Go the extra mile <p>Give to everyone who asks us and to everyone who wants to borrow from us</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Love for our enemies is a mark of the family-likeness of God, who blesses good and evil alike o Even the tax collectors and pagans love those who are like them
The point	Our duty to others is not only not to kill them but to treat them with respect. Sin is not simply the wrong we do, but the right we fail to do.	Sin is not simply the wrong things we do, but also wrong thoughts. We must treat sin ruthlessly.	Sin is not simply about our actions but also the effect we have on others. Marriage is supposed to be taken seriously.	God cannot be excluded from certain areas of our life. He sees everything and expects honesty in every part of our lives.	Evil must be overcome by good. Sin against us by others does not excuse a sinful response on our part.	Sin is not simply to do wrong but also to fail to do right. We cannot exclude people from our duty to love others simply because we would naturally classify them as our enemy

Question:

Could these six examples correspond to the six orders of the Mishnah (which were apparently laid out by Hillel)? If anyone has a possible answer to this please email me!

The six orders of the Mishnah are:

- *Zeraim* ("Seeds"), dealing with prayer and blessings, tithes and agricultural laws (11 tractates)
- *Moed* ("Festival"), pertaining to the laws of the Sabbath and the Festivals (12 tractates)
- *Nashim* ("Women"), concerning marriage and divorce, some forms of oaths and the laws of the nazirite (7 tractates)
- *Nezikin* ("Damages"), dealing with civil and criminal law, the functioning of the courts and oaths (10 tractates)
- *Kodashim* ("Holy things"), regarding sacrificial rites, the Temple, and the dietary laws (11 tractates) and
- *Tohorot* ("Purities"), pertaining to the laws of purity and impurity, including the impurity of the dead, the laws of ritual purity for the priests, the laws of "family purity" (menstrual laws) and others (12 tractates).