

Sermon on the Mount

Religion of the Heart

Matthew 5:19 - 20

Last week we reflected on the relationship between Jesus and the law; this week we look at what *our* relationship is to the law.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but, whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:19 – 20)

A first century Jew listening to Jesus would have been shocked by these statements. The scribes and Pharisees were, in many senses, the most outstanding people of the nation. The scribes spent their entire life on the study and illustration of the law and everyone looked up to them as a result. The Pharisees were famous for their sanctity - they set themselves apart from the community by writing and enforcing rigid rules and regulations that went far beyond anything in the Old Testament Scriptures. The Jews believed the scribes and Pharisees lived the epitome of righteousness (i.e., being in right relationship with God); if these virtuous religious men could not enter the kingdom of heaven, who possibly could?

Jesus was critical of the scribes and the Pharisees because of their focus on external conformity to the law. Believing that outward obedience attained righteousness, they demanded strict obedience to their rigid rules and regulations. For example, they demanded a man to pay strict tithes to the Temple even while his family went hungry. The man's Temple obligation would be met, but at the cost of his starving family. The Pharisees and scribe's obsession with the letter of the law caused them to lose sight of the inner Spirit of the law, i.e., its intent, and its innate connection with justice, love, and compassion.

Jesus, on the other hand, asks for deeper, not stricter, obedience. Jesus didn't believe in an external, formal religion but instead a religion of the heart, the love-centered righteousness which the Prophets foresaw with the coming of the Messiah: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33); "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27).

Jesus goes further still by telling us personal obedience is not enough; Christian disciples must also teach to others the binding nature of the law's commandments. We are to live a life of righteousness and teach others to do the same. "Righteousness" is the one word that sums up Christian living, and the theme of the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount teaches us just that, the kind of life of righteousness which the Christian is to live.

Reflection Question: In what ways does my life reflect a love-centered righteousness, and how?