

“BUT I TELL YOU”

Contrasts between Jesus' ethical teaching and Pharisaic legalistic traditions

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OVERVIEW

Jesus Christ used the Sermon on the Mount as an opportunity to teach to the people what God's Laws to Moses actually meant. The Sermon on the Mount, according to the Book of Matthew, is separated into three (3) distinct sections: The beatitudes, or declarations of blessedness (Matthew 5:1-12), ethical warnings and cautions (Matthew 5:13-20), and contrasts between Jesus' ethical teaching and Jewish legalistic traditions (Matthew 5:21-48). It is this third section that I want to explore further. I will compare and contrast Jesus' correct interpretation of the Law at the Sermon on the Mount against the oral traditions that were taught by the Scribes and by the Pharisees.

In order for the reader to understand what the Scribes and Pharisees were teaching to the Jewish people, I will briefly describe the Oral Law, the Scribal Law, and the teachings of the Pharisees. First of all, the Torah is the written word of God. The Torah is comprised of the Ten Commandments as well as additional revelations from God to Moses during the next forty years after the Ten Commandments were received on Mt. Sinai. These Laws taught the people of God how to live in relationship to one another and to God.¹ From a Christian perspective, the Torah is equivalent to the first five books of the Old Testament.² Christian and Jewish religions both believe that the Torah is the written word of God. However, the Jewish people also believe that Moses received the Oral Law during this forty year time span as well. This Oral Law was passed on verbally to Joshua, then to the elders of Israel, and then to the great assembly. The Oral Law

¹ Edward Earl Burgess, *Christ, the Crown of the Torah*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 14.

² The Torah often refers to the complete Hebrew Scriptures including the Prophets and the poetic writings, but technically includes only the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch).

supposedly refined and explained the general principles in the commandments. Since the Oral Law was not written down until somewhere between 200 and 500 AD, the Scribes and Pharisees in the Synagogues had an interesting role during the Inter-Testamental Period and the time of Jesus Christ; they were specialists and interpreters of the Law. The Scribes were not satisfied with the general moral guidance of the Torah so they reduced every great principle to thousands of rules and regulations.³ To serve God in the tradition of a strict Orthodox Jew meant keeping thousands of legalistic regulations never received by Moses. The Pharisees were the lay leaders during Jesus' time that externally appeared to uphold each and every one of these commandments, both from the Written Law and the Oral Law. In addition, the Pharisees also expected everyone else to maintain the same level of righteousness as they did.

The contrast that Jesus sets up in this third section of the Sermon on the Mount is not between the Old Testament and His teaching. Rather it is between external representations of the rabbinic tradition of the Oral Law on the one hand, and Jesus' correct interpretation of the Written Law on the other.⁴ Christ is not telling the people that the Laws of Moses are over, but instead He is teaching the people the true meaning of God's Word versus the Scribes' and Pharisees' teaching of oral traditions.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." What exactly does fulfill mean? Webster's Revised Dictionary defines "fulfill" as:

³ Burgess, *Christ, the Crown of the Torah*, 17.

⁴ Kenneth Barker, *The NIV Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 1445.

“To accomplish or carry into effect, as an intention, promise, or prophecy, a desire, prayer, or requirement, etc.; to complete by performance.”

Dr. C. van der Waal points out that, “Christ does not oppose the Law of Moses, but the *interpretation* the Scribes and Pharisees had given it. He *confirms* the Torah as an evangelical commandment. He turns against the formalized use of the Law by superficial oral education.” (emphasis added)⁵ Christ is fulfilling the Law by giving it the fullest meaning. He did not dissolve the Torah, but instead showed a deeper meaning that lay in the mind of God. His teaching moved from the surface to the heart, from the external to the spiritual, from the outward ritual to the soul.⁶ The emphasis of the Law is based on the underlying principles and total commitment rather than the external acknowledgement and obedience displayed by the Pharisees.

During Jesus’ discourse regarding this contrast, it is clear that He is speaking specifically about the hypocritical, legalism that was running rampant. According to Webster’s Revised Dictionary, “hypocrisy” is defined as:

“The act or practice of a hypocrite; a feigning to be what one is not, or to feel what one does not feel; a dissimulation, or a concealment of one’s real character, disposition, or motives; especially the assuming of false appearances of virtue or religion; a simulation of goodness.”

The Scribes and Pharisees taught this legalism to the people, but for most of them it was an external observance to the Law only. Christ knew that 1) what they were teaching was incorrect (e.g. the Oral Law), and 2) the correct portion of the Law being taught was not being followed thru in the heart. Jesus is not against their teaching, but their deficient observance of the spirit of the Law. Matthew 23:2-7 points this out:

⁵ Dr. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Press, 1968), 77.

⁶ Burgess, *Christ, the Crown of the Torah*, 141.

² [Jesus said,] "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

Jesus cites six (6) examples of Pharisaical externalism and rabbinical tradition at the Sermon on the Mount. Six times Jesus states, "You have heard that it was said..." and then recites a well-known Law from the Torah and each time Jesus follows with "But I tell you..." and an explanation of the true spirit of the meaning of the Law; in other words, this is what you have heard in the synagogues, but this is what I am telling you. Jesus demonstrates that the Jewish people, including the Pharisees, continued to fall short in the eyes of God. The six contrasts during the Sermon on the Mount include: Murder, Adultery, Divorce, Oaths, Revenge, and Hatred of Enemies.

MURDER

Jesus's first contrast deals with murder. In Matthew 5:21, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'" Surely everyone present at the sermon that day was familiar with the Ten Commandments and this Law in particular. Both Exodus and Deuteronomy, books present in the Torah, state that "You shall not murder." The Old Testament is full of numerous accounts of one person purposely killing or murdering another and how God was angry at this act. Genesis contains the account of Cain killing Abel in the fields and how God was angry and cursed Cain and drove him from the ground. Exodus 21:14 states, "But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from

my altar and put him to death.” Numbers 35:16-21 states what is to occur if a man murders another:

¹⁶ 'If a man strikes someone with an iron object so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁷ Or if anyone has a stone in his hand that could kill, and he strikes someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁸ Or if anyone has a wooden object in his hand that could kill, and he hits someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁹ The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. ²⁰ If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies ²¹ or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.

The message was clear, however, the inward acknowledgement of this Law by the Pharisees changed over time. Moses and Abraham surely understood God's intention, but over time the Scribes and Pharisees corrupted the meaning of the Law. This is obvious since in Mark we find the Pharisees, Jews that attempted to live perfect in God's eyes, have no problem plotting the death of Jesus Christ with the Herodians. If they were able to rationalize their plans for Christ's death within their interpretation of the Law, then Jesus' message would have been extremely contradictory to their belief system. This demonstrates the outward appearance of holiness, but the inward rejection of the truth.

Jesus enlightens the crowd to the true spirit of the Law as He continues on in Matthew by explaining the original meaning behind this Law, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Jesus did not mean that anger is always sinful; on the contrary, He states that anger which causes one person to wish death upon another is synonymous to murder. In addition, Jesus is not strictly referring

to one's bloodline "brother", but toward all people. The murderous act here is coming from the heart and will be subject to judgment. Jesus is pointing out the differences between the legal laws of the times and the ethical spirit of the Written Word.

Jesus adds to His message, "Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca', is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." In this text, Jesus is forbidding uncontrolled rage or temper. All insults and slanderous words are considered sinful. Christ wants us to make "conscious every gesture, every casting of the eye, as well as every passionate word."⁷

Jesus continues on with two examples of how we should deal with anger by means of reconciliation. The first example is to reconcile with someone that has something against you prior to making an offering at the altar of the Lord. In other words, how can God forgive a man's sins via an offering when the man clearly has not reconciled his own debts on earth? The second example is to reconcile matters with an adversary prior to going to court. The courts will not be as forgivable as the one who has the grudge against you. God truly is the final judge and Jesus is indicating that judgment will be cast on you. How can you come to the Lord with a clean heart when you have not attempted to resolve the problem yourself? The gift offered at the altar did not suffice for broken human relationships. Jesus had little patience with the externals of religion, instead obedience was better than sacrifice; reconciliation was better than the gift; and

⁷ Author Washington Pink, *Author Washington Pink's Archive 1886 - 1952*

forgiveness was better than the goat.⁸ Jesus is clarifying the real issue here and expressing the true spirit of the Law, not the literal translation or Scribal exposition.

The Pharisees and Jews understood “You shall not murder”, but could they understand and comprehend “You shall not hate?” At this point, Christ had the attention of everyone around Him. How could they possibly live up to this explanation of the Law?

ADULTERY

Jesus’ next contrast with the Pharisaical teachings and the Mosaic Law deals with adultery. Jesus says in Matthew 5:27, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’” The teaching here is referring to the Law in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18. The teaching at Jesus’ time, however, was a considerably weakened form of this commandment. The Pharisees taught that a man’s good intentions were considered good deeds while a man’s evil intentions were counted against him only if he committed the overt act.⁹ The term adultery was also redefined. The definition was changed to mean only the act of sexual intercourse between a Jewish man and the wife (or betrothed woman) of another Jew.¹⁰ In other words, intercourse between a married Jewish man and an unmarried Jewish woman was not considered adultery!

Jesus says in Matthew 5:28, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” He continued His explanation of this Law with a hyperbole, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be

⁸ Burgess, *Christ, the Crown of the Torah*, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” Jesus is not teaching the people to maim or injure themselves, but instead He is saying we should go to extreme measures to avoid temptation and sin.

According to Jesus, the simple thought of lust by a married man toward another woman is identical to the act of adultery itself. This is what God intended in the first place. The Pharisees lead the Jewish people to believe that they strictly uphold the Law. Actually, it was the Pharisees themselves that enforced this commandment by stoning. The biblical reference was Leviticus 20:10, “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife – with the wife of his neighbor – both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.” If stoning was the punishment for adultery, then should the Pharisees not also have to live up to the penalty for their sins? Even the Pharisees, men of flesh, encountered lust. Christ teaches the people that the Law deals with what is in a man’s heart and that is what counts in the eyes of God.

As the people continued to listen, they surely would have wondered, “How could I possibly live up to the Law the way Jesus is explaining it?” Indeed, how could any possibly keep their hearts from ‘murdering’ and ‘lusting’?

DIVORCE

The third contrasting statement concerns divorce and closely ties in with the previous section of adultery. In Matthew 5:31 Jesus says, “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce,’” This passage is taken from

Deuteronomy 24:1, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...” During Jesus’ time, however, the rules for divorce became increasingly relaxed and watered down. Hillel the Elder, the father of Pharisaism, allowed the husband great latitude in determining “something indecent”.¹¹ A husband could divorce his wife for spoiling his dinner, appearing in a public place with her head uncovered, or if she spoke with men in the street.¹² The Rabbi Akiba, considered one of Judaism’s greatest scholars, said, “If any man saw a woman more beautiful than his own wife, he may put his wife away [divorce her].”¹³ Although this quote was taken after the death of Christ, it still reflects the thoughts and sentiments of the Jewish leaders of that time.

Jesus speaks about divorce and clarifies the issue in Matthew 5:32, “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” Jesus is tying together the true meaning of the Law concerning divorce with the Law concerning adultery. Jesus states that they are both wrong, but even more explicitly that divorce may lead to adultery. God deeply desires our marriages to stay together and that was His plan since the creation of Eve. Even Jesus’ disciples find this explanation hard to comprehend. In Matthew 19:10, we read, “If this is the situation between the husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” Jesus quickly responded, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, 146.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.

because they were born that way; men made others that way; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Later in Matthew 19:3, it was the Pharisees themselves that question Jesus’ comments about divorce by saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” Jesus tells us that it was because men’s hearts were already hard that God permitted divorce. The fact that it was the Pharisees that asked this question seems to indicate that they were granting legal divorces all along and saw no problem with it.

Once again, Jesus is pointing out the difference between the legal laws of the times and the ethical spirit of the written Word. In Matthew 19:8, Jesus tells the Pharisees, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” God’s plan for man and woman goes all the way back to Genesis where, upon creating Eve from Adam’s rib, God says in Genesis 2:24, ‘For this reason a man will leave his mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.’ God always intended for marriage to be a permanent covenant between man and woman and God.

If the Pharisees and the Jewish people during the time of Jesus were anything like the people of today, this is a surprising statement made by Jesus. Jesus stresses to the people that marriage is a very holy vow and this vow is not simply between two earthly mortals, but between two of God’s most loved creatures and with God Himself.

OATHS

The fourth contrasting statement deals with oaths. The Old Testament is full of oaths taken by God and by man. Oaths were binding agreements and guaranteed the truthfulness of the task at hand. The word “oath” or “oaths” occurs forty-five (45) times in the Pentateuch. This demonstrates the importance placed on the oath and was a sign of truthfulness. In Matthew 5:33, Jesus points out to the people, “Again, you have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’” Christ is referring to the commandments in Exodus 20:7, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name”, since the Jewish people swore in the name of God to secure an oath.

The Pharisees had developed an elaborate system of oath taking. The rabbinic law had divided oaths up into two categories: binding and non-binding.¹⁴ Oaths taken in the name of God were binding whereas oaths sworn to heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or the head were not binding and could be evaded.¹⁵ Jesus calls upon the people to hold to the true spirit of oath taking (i.e. tell the truth, always). Jesus teaches the people that all oaths are ultimately sworn upon God. The simple swearing upon the city and the head must have indicated that the Jewish people were swearing upon everything they did and thus, minimizing the significance of the oath.

In Matthew 5:34, Jesus continues, “But I tell you, do not swear at all; either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' by 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." Christ is pointing out that we should have simple honesty amongst ourselves.

Christ simplifies this Law into a the catch all phrase, "Simply let your 'Yes' by 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'." Although the phrase may be simple, the fulfillment of this Law by the Pharisees and the Jewish people, or even by today's standards, is difficult. Jesus taught the people that if each person had revered the name of God and respected truth, all oaths and all swearing would be unnecessary.

REVENGE

The fifth statement of contrast deals with revenge. In Matthew 5:38, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'". This Law was present in Exodus 21:23, "But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, " as well as in Leviticus 24:20, "fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured." This Law limited the punishment to fit the crime, not to exceed it, but the Pharisees from the school of Shammai taught an incorrect meaning of this Law.¹⁶ They incorrectly taught the people that this is the Law of Retaliation, when in actuality it was a Law of limits. Once more we find Jesus pointing out the difference between the legal laws of the times and the ethical spirit of the written Word.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

Jesus continued in Matthew 5:39 saying, “But I tell you do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go a mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” In His exposition, Jesus is not preaching submissiveness as a line of defense. Instead, Christ is using hyperbole to express a point. We should not take revenge, but attempt to make peace with others.

HATRED OF ENEMIES

The last contrasting statement from Jesus deals with hatred or, on the positive, Love. In Matthew 5:43 Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love you neighbor and hate your enemy.’” Although the text “hate your enemy” is to be found nowhere in the Old Testament, it seems apparent that it was taught by rabbinical tradition through the Pharisees and was an accepted part of the Jewish ethic at the time.¹⁷ Jesus follows the familiar text with his explanation in Matthew 5:44, “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rains on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Do perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

¹⁷ Barker, *The NIV Study Bible*, 1446.

Jesus tells us to love everybody for it is easy to love only those that love you. God wants us to love men and forgive them for the things they do. He wants us to be like “sons of your Father in heaven.” He wants us to be like He is. We are to pray for our enemies to be blessed. Jesus calls forth all of us to exemplify God’s true mercy that He has for all men saying that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good.”

As the people on the mount listened to Jesus preach, surely this explanation of loving one’s enemies shook them the most. Christ says that we are to be “perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The people must have believed this task to be impossible. The inability to be perfect, however, should no cease in seeking the truth and improving.

CONCLUSION

As I spend time researching Christ’s Sermon on the Mount exposition, I quickly realize the impact each one of these passages on our culture today. The effect on the multitudes surrounding Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount and His direct comparisons between the current teachings of the Pharisees and meaning of God’s commandments in the Old Testament are amazing. These Laws took on man’s interpretation over time instead of keeping to their divine origins. Their meanings were changed and bent so that man could live in a false state of security since any other interpretation would be difficult to live up to.

Jesus’ last contrast sums up His entire ministry. He tells us to love everybody. If we loved everybody, would we murder? If we loved everybody, would we lust after another? If we loved everybody, would we marry and then divorce? If we loved

everybody, would we have to swear by oaths that our words are indeed true? If we loved everybody, would we seek revenge? If we loved everybody, would we hate our enemies? The answer to all of these questions is “No”. Love for one another helps us to fulfill God’s Laws.

I find the evidence within these passages overwhelming. As human beings, we can try very hard to live up to the expectations of God, but continue to fall short. The Pharisees were an obvious example of a group of people that used all their human abilities to gain favor in the Lord. Yet, they were unable to fulfill the Mosaic Law because they were hypocrites. Outwardly they acted holy that the rest of the population, but in their hearts they sinned like everyone else. They did not live up to the Messianic expectations of the Law. Jesus brought to our attention those passages with which the Jewish people were familiar with and those they used to measure themselves in the eyes of God Almighty, but Jesus also identified how the Jews used the wrong measuring device. They misunderstood the Mosaic Laws due to Oral traditions and thus bent the laws toward a moral and civil code that they could obtain. They measured themselves with man-made concepts, understandings, and traditions. They compared themselves through the outward expression of a said-faith, but did not live spiritually in a true faith. Jesus provided meaning that clearly shows all of us that we are truly unable to live up to God’s standards regardless of effort. It is by God’s grace alone that we are capable of being righteous with the Lord.

The Law started out plain and simple on Mt. Sinai with the Word of God, but over time, traditions and expectations were added to it creating many branches and conditions

called the Oral Law. This Oral Law was taught to the people and made them strive for the wrong ideals. Jesus, in saying But I tell you... pruned away all of the Oral “branches” and brought men back to the “root” of the written Law. Many people today that do not understand the atoning grace of God’s crucified Son will feel like the Jews did as they listened to Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount. As they read or hear what is expected of them they will wonder, “Who then can be saved?” The verse that calms my fears and clears my conscience is from Matthew 19:26, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”