

New Law

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20, 22:34-40

Now, over the last few weeks, we've been following the story of the Bible from beginning to end. The flow of the story is there in your notes, but rather than going through the whole thing, I want to revisit one of the weeks because I want you to see a connection. The Bible tells us that the people of Israel spent 400 years as slaves in Egypt. But God called Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let his people go. Over course, Pharaoh resisted, so God sent plagues to convince him and he finally let them go.

When they left Egypt, with Pharaoh's army close on their tail, they came to the Red Sea. And God again rescued them by parting the Red Sea and letting them escape through the waters. After that they traveled through the desert and they came to Mt. Sinai. It's on the side of this mountain that Moses gives the Law from God to Israel.

Now, the point of the Law of Moses was to shape this group of people into a nation that represented God to the rest of the world. They were Abraham's descendants that would carry his blessing to the world, so he needed to teach them what it meant to be God's people. How are the people of God supposed to live? The Old Covenant was that if they were faithful to the Covenant and God would bless them and protect them. But if they were not, he would remove his protection from them.

Of course, Israel was not faithful to the covenant, so God allowed them to be taken from their land into exile in Babylon. But God promised to send a king to lead them out of exile and set up a new Kingdom and give them a new law.

The imagery the prophets use to describe this new kingdom and new way of life is stunning. For instance, this is what it says in Jeremiah 31:31-34. **³¹“The days are coming, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.”**

³³“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time: I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

So, a couple of things to notice here. First, Jeremiah calls this is a New Covenant. Now, I want you to grab the red pew Bible in front of you and turn to page 657. Your Bible is divided in two parts—the Old Testament or Covenant and the New Testament or New Covenant. Jeremiah is foretelling this page right here. In other words, while there is common history, there is also a significant change in God’s dealing with his people and that change begins and ends with Jesus.

The second thing is in verse 33. This is the substance of this New Covenant. **“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”** And that’s our focus today.

And we’ll do it by looking at what we call the Sermon on the Mount starting at Matthew 5. Now, the reason I walked you through that background is because I want you to see a connection. In verse 1, where does it say Jesus taught this sermon? Where did he go? (on a mountainside) And where did Moses give the Law to the people of Israel? Mt. Sinai. I know some of you are saying, “Stop it! This is just a coincidence.”

But wait, look at this. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus is born, then his family has some hard times under Herod—Herod wants to kill him—where does he go? *Egypt*. Where did Jacob’s family go when famine hit the land? They went to *Egypt*.

In Matthew 4, after his *baptism*, where did Jesus go? Into the wilderness? And how long was he there? *40 days and nights*. In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul equates the Israelites crossing the Red Sea as their *baptism*. After they came out of the Red Sea, where did Moses lead them? To the *wilderness*. And how long did they stay there? *40 years*. When he was in the wilderness, he was tempted by Satan and each time, how did he answer? By quoting Scripture. But not just any Scripture, he was quoting Scripture from the *Law of Moses*.

You see, Matthew is a drawing a parallel between the Exodus story and the life of Jesus. So, in Matthew 5, when Jesus is standing on the side of a mountain and gives the sermon on the mount, people who knew the Exodus story would immediately know what

Jesus is doing. He's delivering a *new law*. By the way, how many disciples are there? [12]

How many tribes of Israel are there?

Now, Jesus doesn't preach this to the whole crowd. Verse 1 says **"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him..."**

So, the crowd isn't there. Now, it was common for Jesus from time to time, to teach his disciples when they were alone. It meant that what he was teaching was only for them.

In other words, the Sermon on the Mount isn't everyday ethical teaching for the general public. This is a new Law for a new Israel. Through Jesus, God is forming a new covenant people for himself. It's not a whole-sale rejection of the Jews—being a part of the people of God includes Jews, but now it's expanding, so it's not just the nation of Israel. It's open to anyone who follows Jesus. But the ethic that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount isn't something Jesus expects others to follow.

Case in point, he says in verse 13, **"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven."**

Jesus isn't expecting *everyone* to be the salt of the earth. Here's what the commentator R.T. France says about it, "*They are those who have entered into a new relationship with "your Father in heaven," and who in consequence are called to a radically new lifestyle, in conscious distinction from the norms of the rest of society. They are to be an alternative society, a "Christian counter-culture."*"

Jesus isn't expecting everyone to be the light of the world. But he's telling those who say, "I want to be a disciple," what the *expectations* and the *purpose* are. The *expectation* is that followers of Jesus will live a certain way that's different than the rest of the world. The *purpose* is to be a testimony for the world to see and in verse 16, the goal is that people will **"see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven."**

Now, this tells us two things. First, Christians often make the mistake of expecting people who don't claim to follow Jesus, conform to Jesus' teachings. Of course, there are some things that are a great harm to society that we should stand against—things like murder, sex trafficking, or cruelty to humans. But as far as these teachings of Jesus, we shouldn't expect the world to live by them.

The second thing is that our purpose for living differently, doing good things is never to show people how great we are. Self-righteousness has no place in Christianity because we know that it's only through the grace of God that we can do anything good. Instead, we do good deeds to give people a glimpse of how great God is. Jesus says our good deeds should cause people to see God and glorify him.

Moving on...starting in verse 17, Jesus makes a connection between the old law and the new law by telling that the new law doesn't contradict the Law of Moses, but it "fulfills" it. He says, **"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 he means by that is that everything in the Old Testament leads to him. The prophets told about a new king—Jesus fulfills that. And as the king, he brings the Law to completion.

Then Jesus says something in verse 20 that might be a bit confusing for us. **"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."**

I had someone talk to me after church last week. Last week, we talked about the Beatitudes and I said that the Beatitudes show that the only requirement for entering the Kingdom is repentance. It doesn't matter where you came from or what kind of sketchy past you have, or skeletons in your closet, you don't need to have it all together to be accepted by God as one of his people. But verse 20 seems to contradict that idea. So, what's going on? Is it easy to get into the Kingdom or is it hard? The answer is, "both."

It's *easy* because it's available to anyone. It's *hard* because it requires a change of heart. I've used this illustration before, but imagine a family on vacation. Mom and dad are in the front seat, three kids in the back. It's a long trip so Johnny, who's the youngest so he has to sit in the middle, gets bored. So, what does he do to pass the time? He starts

to hit his sister just to get a rise out of her. In response, she pushes his hand away and says, “Stop it!” But he keeps going.

So, she appeals to a higher authority. “Dad, Johnny’s hitting me.” And dad says, “Johnny, stop hitting your sister!” So, he does. He starts poking her. And she yells, “Dad!!!” And dad yells back, “I told you to stop hitting your sister.” Johnny says, “I’m not!” “He’s poking me.” So, dad gets smart and he says, “Just don’t touch your sister.” So, what does he do? He gets as close as he possibly can without actually touching her.

Laws alone are ultimately inadequate to bring about what God really wants. The problem is that those laws don’t get to the heart of what dad wants. What does he really want? He wants Johnny to respect his sister. *Respect* is the fulfillment of the law of “no touching your sister.”

Now, that makes things simple because when he respects his sister, you can pretty much throw all the little rules out the window. “Don’t hit, poke, slap, touch, pinch, nudge, push, annoy...” can be summed up in one law—respect your sister. It’s so much simpler. You might even say the respectful brother surpasses the righteousness of the brother who technically doesn’t touch his sister. Respect is the fulfillment of all the little laws.

So, it’s simpler, but it’s also harder. It’s harder because it requires more than a change of behavior, it requires a heart change. Even a sociopath can follow rules if it gets him what he wants. In fact, sometimes religiously following rules can actually work against the intent of those rules. Let me show you what I mean.

In the rest of chapter 5, Jesus gives six examples of how this principle plays out; murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and love for enemies. In each of them, he starts by saying, “You have heard it said...” and quotes a law from the Old Testament or from the oral law passed down by the rabbis. Then, with each, he shows the new kingdom application of that law.

In verse 31, Jesus talks about divorce. He uses that same formula. **“It has been said [in the Law] ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”**

The Old Testament divorce law is only 4 verses—Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but there is actually a backstory to it. Jesus knows that story, so this isn’t meant to be Jesus’ all-encompassing teaching on divorce, but he does get to the heart of the law.

Here’s the issue. People say that the world today is a man’s world, and there’s certainly a lot of truth to that. But it’s nothing compared to the world of the Old Testament. In Old Testament times, men had complete control of pretty much everything—including marriage. Women had very few rights or opportunities and the right and opportunities they did have were derived from their father or their husband.

Historically, there was a debate between two schools of interpretation—those who followed Rabbi Hillel and those who followed Rabbi Shammai. Shammai was the more restrictive one and he said that the only grounds for a man to divorce his wife was

adultery. Hillel was much more liberal and said the man could divorce his wife even for trivial things like spoiling a meal or if he found someone more attractive. A woman was not allowed to divorce her husband.

If a man wanted a divorce, all he had to do was go to his wife and say out loud, “I divorce you!” three times and it was done. He was free and she was out on the streets. Women didn’t work. They didn’t have many rights in society, so her options were limited.

Now, divorce wasn’t supposed to be an option, but Jesus says that Moses allowed it because men’s hearts were hard. So, there were two reasons Moses told the man to get a certificate of divorce.

First, it made it harder for the man to discard his wife because he had to go to an official to get the paperwork.

Second, if the woman didn’t have that certificate of divorce, it might be next to impossible for her to get remarried, because if the man knew she was married, how could he really know or trust that she was divorced and not just trying to seduce him? So, Jesus wanted them to consider the *intent* of the Law, not just the letter of the law.

Fast forward that to today. Christians believe that God hates divorce—the Bible says it. And there’s good reason for it—divorce is destructive and damages children and weakens society. But that law against divorce—which is good and right—has sometimes been used to keep women going back to husbands that were physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive. I have heard of situations where a woman would go to her pastor and

tell him that her husband would beat her physically and the pastor would tell her that God wants her to go back to the marriage because God hates divorce. And because that's the law, she endures a lifetime of abuse.

So, laws against divorce laws can actually be applied in a way that is contrary to the purpose Jesus said they were originally intended. Yes, God hates divorce, but he also hates abuse. Now, of course, there are some people who will go the other way and say divorce is not big deal. Clearly, Scripture—particularly Jesus—says that marriage is intended to be a life-long, one-flesh union between a man and a woman. But divorce laws are intended to be applied according to a greater principle.

What is that principle? Jesus says that principle is the law of *love*. Turn to Matthew 22:34-40. This is Jesus, again, **“³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”**

³⁷Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments—to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. The Apostle Paul says the same thing. Romans 13:8-10, **“⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for**

whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans 13:8-10)

What does that mean? What kind of love is Jesus talking about because there’s are a lot of things that get conflated as love these days. We can love pizza or our children. We can fall in love or *make* love. Society often describes love as an emotion that we can’t control. But that’s not what Jesus is talking about. *What Jesus is talking about is always wanting and doing the best for others.* We could even go back to the garden and say that love promotes the flourishing of others. But it’s not always easy. Maybe you’ve noticed, some people are really hard to love. Jesus knows this. That’s why he has to say in 5:44, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

All of the specific laws serve love. So that raises a question. If love is the fulfillment of the Law, why do we need *any* laws? Why can’t we just let go of all the little detailed laws and just say love? Well, there are two reasons.

First, we don’t always *know* what’s best. Sometimes, we need help to know what’s good and right. We can do destructive things without realizing they’re destructive. Think about the example of pornography. For a long time people called pornography a victimless sin. It’s a consenting adult watching two consenting other consenting adults.

But now, the more we study the effects of pornography use, the more we see how harmful it is. It's a major cause of sex trafficking. It's addictive. It exploits people, especially women, and it's creating a generation of people who have less capacity for love and intimacy. Sometimes we need God's laws, even when we don't understand the purpose behind them.

The second reason is that we often overestimate our own judgment. Take speed limits. Almost everyone thinks they're a good driver. But many people overestimate their ability to control a car at high speeds. I have cat-like reflexes so I can drive 90 miles per hour. I can handle it. But the truth is some well-placed rules can act as guardrails against our own poor judgment. We must always remember that the ultimate point of God's Laws are love.

Now, how many of you do everything out of spirit of love? How many of you always love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? How many of you are sometimes selfish? How many of you sometimes curse other people—or want to curse other people if there wasn't a law against it? It's a high standard. But it's the standard of Kingdom life.

But how can we do this? I mentioned earlier that while living by the law of love is simple, it's not easy. In fact, you might argue that it's easier to obey laws than it is to truly love someone who seems unlovable. But Jesus didn't leave us without help. Remember the passage from Jeremiah. It says, **“I will put my law in their minds and write it on**

their hearts.” Now, Jeremiah doesn’t mean that God will help us memorize the Law and just by knowing the law, we’ll be able to follow it. We all know it doesn’t work that way. It’s part of the human condition to know what’s right and still not be able to do it. That’s the power that sin has over us. But listen to what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8,

“¹Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, [in other words, because of Jesus on the cross, God forgives] ²because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law [what is the righteous requirement of the law? LOVE] might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

I know that’s some dense theological language there, but what he’s saying is that not only does Jesus clarify the law; but through his death and resurrection, he also gives us the power to be able to overcome sin; AND through the power of the Holy Spirit that lives in his disciples, we are empowered to increasingly be able to love people. When you are in Christ, you have the power to overcome and live a life characterized by love. And that is the Law of the Kingdom.