

Epiphany 7 2011  
Matt. 5:38-48

The Sermon on the Mount is found in chapters 5-6 & 7 of Matthew. We are about half way through. Thus far Jesus has dealt with the Beatitudes, the issues of Murder, Adultery, Divorce and taking Oaths. Today the text moves on to the issues of Limiting Revenge and Loving Your Enemies. No one can say that Jesus comes off meek and mild or treads lightly on controversial topics. Quite the contrary, he meets them head on and pronounces judgment on our attempts to limit the demands of God's law.

The Sermon on the Mount is unique in that Jesus takes the Jewish law and radicalizes it. He claims authority over the law. He claims the power to expand the reach of the law to the point that the listener is forced into a corner where there is no escape. For example, Jesus says in 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.”** **“Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches other to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.”** (vs. 19). **“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.”** (vs20) Wow! So much for our attempts to say that the Bible doesn't really mean what it clearly says.

Jesus radicalizes the law when he says, **“You have heard it said, “Do not murder”, But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother is subject to judgment”**.

And again, **“You have heard it said, “Do not commit adultery” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”**

And again, **“It has been said, “Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress.”**

And again, **“You have heard it was said, “Do not break your oath” But I tell you, Do not swear at all...let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no”.**

Jesus claims authority over the law and the authority to interpret the law and to add to the laws demands and consequences. In doing so he claims the power and authority of Almighty God! No wonder the people were dumbstruck by his preaching! And no wonder the religious leaders plotted to kill him! Jesus claims that he is has authority to not just interpret the law

of God but to also challenge his listeners by calling into question their thinking that they have kept the law by rigidly following the letter of the law.

In vs. 36 he says, “You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. 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 one 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.”

Jewish law set limits on retribution. “An eye for an eye”. It is not lawful to kill a person who has injured you. This controls revenge as an instrument in the redress of grievances. But then Jesus radicalizes it when he turns the business of revenge upside down. He says, “if someone strikes you on the 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.” Jesus says that revenge is replaced by willingness to be used and abused. Do you see where this is heading? It’s heading toward the cross! This just doesn’t seem right to us. We may like to play the victim in order to get sympathy, but no one wants to actually be a victim of crime or abuse.

Is this Sermon on the Mount intended for us as an outline for Christian behavior? Or is it a sermon about Jesus and his fulfillment of the law? Well it’s both. It is a sermon intended for us in that it forces us to see the law as God’s rule for life. The law is pure, holy, righteous, true. God’s law is given for our good. When we break God’s law we harm ourselves and our neighbors. God’s law is meant to control sin because sin hurts us and our neighbor. That’s the civil use of the law...to control bad behavior.

But this sermon is also intended for us to see the law in its theological use. That means it forces us to see the law as an accuser who never lets up, never lets go, never lifts a finger to help us obey but just demands more and more obedience, greater and greater adherence, higher and higher standards. The law never ends and in the end it kills us with its demands for perfection.

So is this sermon about us and our behavior or is it about Jesus? Here is where the Sermon on the Mount becomes gospel, or good news if we see in this sermon a preview of what Jesus will do in his ministry. Jesus turns the

other cheek, Jesus carries his cross, Jesus dies as an innocent man who bears the sins of the world.

Jesus demonstrates this kind of behavior when he is arrested and beaten by the soldiers who crucify him. Jesus is consistent. His words are congruent with his actions. He demonstrates a kind of power that is totally upside down. He suffers humiliation, loss, defeat, & death yet wins exultation, glory, victory and life.

And here's the best part. By his obedience to the law Jesus fulfills the law. Now this is not the same as saying the law disappears or goes away. No, the law remains as a judge over us in this life. But the law no longer has authority over your salvation. Jesus has that authority and he gives you the forgiveness of your sins by his death on the cross.

So now the law becomes not something to dread or something to try to work around or avoid. Because in Christ Jesus your sins are forgiven and you are made right with God. And now you see the law as God's pure and holy will for your life. The law becomes for you a way to live in this world that makes your life better and helps make the world a better place...where marriage is honored, where life is protected, where justice prevails, where one's word is true, where revenge is controlled and where serving others is gladly done. This is God's good and gracious will for you and for His world. And you strive to live this way, not in order to get saved but because you are saved in Christ Jesus who fulfilled the law for you. Thanks be to God. AMEN