

Christ and His Law

Christ and the Law in the Sermon on the Mount

Lesson #4 for April 26, 2014

Scriptures: Matthew 5:17-48; Luke 16:16; Romans 7:24.

1. In this lesson we will be discussing the third portion of the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5:17-48) Jesus had just spent the entire night in conversation with His Father. In the morning, He officially appointed His 12 disciples. While this was happening, a huge crowd of people were gathering around Him. In order to understand the context, we must read Matthew 4:24 and Luke 6:17 along with *Desire of Ages* 298.2. We see that there were people crowding around Him from Galilee, from Judea, even from Jerusalem, from Perea on the other side of the Jordan River, from Decapolis to the north, from Idumea way to the south of Judea, from the Phoenician coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, and even from Syria. They were crowding around Him for two reasons: 1) They wanted to be healed; and 2) They wanted to hear what He had to say. Was Jesus busy?
2. The entire recorded portion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) can be read in a few minutes. No doubt, Jesus spent most of the day presenting it. Of course, He was interrupted frequently, but He definitely had much more to say than what is recorded for us. And probably, all the while He was talking, people were crowding in to try just to touch Him to be healed.
3. While Matthew called this the Sermon on the Mount, Luke seemed to suggest it was on a level place. Ellen White (*DA* 298) simply said He climbed the side of the mountain and then looked for a level place where He could address the crowds. Scholars have suggested that this sermon may not have been just one sermon but perhaps several different sermons from different times that were put together here as a kind of announcement of His kingdom after selecting His disciples.
4. In the Sermon on the Mount, the first section (Matthew 5:1-12) is known as the beatitudes. There is a second section in which Jesus compared Christians to light and salt. (Matthew 5:13-16) In this lesson, we will focus on the third section, Matthew 5:17-48, in which Jesus compared previously understood interpretations of the Mosaic Law with His new, deeper perspective on those laws. This section is sometimes referred to by scholars as the antitheses. Finally, there is a longer section (Matthew 6:1-7:23) in which Jesus talked about various aspects of Christian behavior.
5. Read Matthew 5:17-20. How did the Pharisees respond to these words? When Jesus spoke of the law, was He speaking about the Ten Commandments? The five books of Moses (the Torah)? Or, the entire Old Testament? There is reasonably good evidence to support each of these claims. (Compare Matthew 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; Acts 13:15; 24:14; and Romans 3:21.)
6. We need to recognize that the God of the Old Testament was Jesus Christ Himself. (John 5:39; Luke 24:44; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4) So, when Jesus was comparing laws given in the Old Testament with His new interpretations, He was talking about His own words on two different occasions. What does that tell us about God's way of communicating with human beings? What was the context in each situation? Are the Old Testament representations which Jesus seemed to be setting aside really in conflict with His new examples?
7. What specifically do you think Jesus had in mind when He said in Matthew 5:17, "I have not come to do away with them [the laws of Moses and the teachings of the prophets] but to make their teachings come true" or "to fulfill them"? The word *fulfill* comes from the Greek word *plero* which means literally "to fill up" or "complete." It suggests that one is filling a container to the brim. Two possible explanations have been given for this verse. One is obviously that Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of many of the prophecies of the Old Testament. (Luke 24:25-27) But, in this context, it is more likely that Jesus meant that He came to give us the true meaning of the passages of the Old Testament.
8. Malachi 3:6 tells us emphatically that God "does not change." Would it be true then to say that His words and His teachings in the Old Testament—when properly understood—are still a true picture of who He is? The problem is that we change. So, God speaks differently at different

times. He meets us where we are in our Christian experience.

9. Undoubtedly, there were scribes and Pharisees in His audience who immediately suggested that He was doing away with or abolishing the law of the Old Testament. So, before they had a chance to speak up, Jesus said, "Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with—not until the end of all things." (Matthew 5:18, *GNB*) Jesus's main point was not just to point out the emptiness of the righteousness proposed by Pharisees, scribes, or even Sadducees, but rather, to promote the kind of righteousness that really makes a difference. That is what He Himself was talking about in Jeremiah 31:31-34. God promises to make the necessary changes.
10. But, if God does not change, why did He need to talk about a new covenant? What was the main difference between the new covenant and the old covenant as described in Exodus 19:8 and 24:3,7? In the first covenant, the people were doing the promising; in the second, it was God.
11. Read Matthew 5:21-26. Jesus next turned to individual commandments and what they are supposed to mean. Compare Exodus 20:13 with Exodus 21:12 and Leviticus 24:17.
12. It is very interesting to note that later in the writings of Moses, violation of each of the Ten Commandments except one was to result in a death decree! (Compare Joshua 1:16-18.) There was only one commandment that had no death decree associated with it. Which commandment do you think that is? It is the 10th commandment—because that commandment is broken only in the mind; one cannot read the motives of another to know if it has been violated. (Compare Romans 7:7-11, 14-25.) In the case of the commandment not to kill, Jesus focused on the motive behind the action. He recognized the very important difference between someone who kills another person accidentally (Exodus 20:13; Numbers 35:12) and one who thinks it through, plans it, and does it intentionally. Jesus was recognizing that the damage sin does to us happens in our brains long before the actual action may take place. Compare Matthew 5:22 and 1 John 3:15. How many people have wanted to kill another but either could not or later changed their minds? Christ was clearly pointing out that we need to be changed by beholding the life of Christ and the teachings of the entire Bible—not just hoping for forgiveness. (See Philippians 4:8.)
13. Read Matthew 5:27-32. The biblical definition of *adultery* was a person already married who was sexually involved with someone other than his/her spouse. The Old Testament is very clear that both of the involved parties were to be put to death unless it occurred in a remote area where it would be presumed that the woman cried for assistance and no one came to her help. (See Deuteronomy 22:23-27) Raping a young woman who was not yet married carried a different penalty. (Deuteronomy 22:28-29)
14. Why do you think Jesus spoke so forcefully against those who commit adultery? Should people really be cutting out their own eyes or cutting off their own hands? Was Paul possibly thinking about this passage when he wrote Romans 7:24? In some nations the hand of a thief is still cut off!
15. It is not a sin that men are attracted to women and *vice versa*. We should have learned that from the story of Adam and Eve. So, what makes that attraction turn into a sin? If men and women were not attracted to each other, very few would get married; and the race would die out.
16. It is interesting to notice that the Old Testament rules about divorce seemed to focus primarily on the woman. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) Christ's explanation and expansion of the commandment against adultery focused specifically on men. Why this difference? Notice these interesting words from Ellen White. Is surrendering our wills a loss of our freedom like surrendering to a dictator?

The surrender of the will is represented as plucking out the eye or cutting off the hand. Often it seems to us that to surrender the will to God is to consent to go through life maimed or crippled. But it is better, says Christ, for self to be maimed, wounded, crippled, if thus you may enter into life. That which you look upon as disaster is the door to highest benefit.—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 61.1. (Compare *The Desire of Ages* 668.3.)

17. The commandment against killing and the commandment against adultery are found in the Decalogue. The laws that Jesus mentioned next against divorce and swearing falsely even under oath were taken from other portions of the writings of Moses. Was Jesus making explicit the point that He was including all Old Testament law? (See Deuteronomy 23:21-23 and Matthew 5:33-37.)
18. Read Acts 5:1-11. What do you think happened in this story? What would be the result if such a story happened in an Adventist church today? How many of us have made promises which we never intended to keep or perhaps could not keep for some reason? Do we need to be very careful in this area?
19. Once again, we need to notice that it is what happens in the mind that is important. When we fail to keep a promise, we are breaking down a mental barrier, making it easier for us to falsify again.
20. Read Matthew 5:38-48. (Compare Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:17-21; Deuteronomy 19:21.) This law is referred to by the Latin expression *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation. Many ancient nations had this kind of law on their books. It does seem to promote fairness. Careful comparison of some of those ancient laws—for example, in the code of Hammurabi—make it clear that this law was given to prevent a very harsh response to the loss of an eye, arm, foot, or life. Without this rule, a powerful, wealthy person could wreak havoc on his enemy or “inferior” such as a servant.
21. There is a story told of a Roman senator who was killed by one of his slaves. In response, 400 slaves were killed. So, the law of *lex talionis* was at least more fair than that!
22. How should the Christian retaliate? Or, should we? How do you understand Proverbs 25:21-22? (Compare Romans 12:20; 2 Kings 6:22; and 2 Chronicles 25:15.) As a child, did you ever wish that you could heap coals of fire on an offending sibling or rival? But truthfully, is it really possible to heap coals of fire on someone’s head using kindness?
23. Finally, in Matthew 5:44-45, Jesus took us to the ultimate challenge. How is it possible to love your enemies? If you love them, are they still enemies? Through Moses, God had told the children of Israel not to take revenge on people but to “love them as you love yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) How does that fit with Deuteronomy 23:3-6? If you had asked one of the Jews in Jesus’s day who their enemies were, would they not have responded, “The Romans”? How often do you think Jesus carried a load for a Roman soldier? (Matthew 5:40)
24. How do you think God feels about blessing His wicked children? And most important of all, what does it do to us to love our enemies and pray for them?
25. For a lot more detail about the Sermon on the Mount, see *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 298-314. Notice some interesting comments from those pages.

Every impure thought defiles the soul, impairs the moral sense, and tends to obliterate the impressions of the Holy Spirit. It dims the spiritual vision, so that men cannot behold God. The Lord may and does forgive the repenting sinner; but though forgiven, the soul is marred. All impurity of speech or of thought must be shunned by him who would have clear discernment of spiritual truth. (DA 302.2)

Selfishness prevents us from beholding God. The self-seeking spirit judges of God as altogether such a one as itself. (DA 302.3)

While those who yield to the influence of the Holy Spirit begin war with themselves, those who cling to sin war against the truth and its representatives. (DA 306.1)

Though the wicked know it not, they owe even the blessings of this life to the presence, in the world, of God’s people whom they despise and oppress. (DA 306.4)

26. What will be the result if we truly follow God’s recommendations about keeping His law?

The law is an expression of the thought of God; when received in Christ, it becomes our thought. It lifts us above the power of natural desires and tendencies, above temptations that lead to sin. God desires us to be happy, and He gave us

the precepts of the law that in obeying them we might have joy. (DA 308.1)

27. What is so damaging about not trusting God and breaking His commandments?

All who obey as He did are likewise declaring that the law is “holy, and just, and good.” Romans 7:12. On the other hand, all who break God’s commandments are sustaining Satan’s claim that the law is unjust, and cannot be obeyed. Thus they second the deceptions of the great adversary, and cast dishonor upon God. They are the children of the wicked one, who was the first rebel against God’s law. To admit them into heaven would again bring in the elements of discord and rebellion, and imperil the well-being of the universe. No man who willfully disregards one principle of the law shall enter the kingdom of heaven. (DA 308.4)

28. What would Jesus say to the members of your church in the 21st century? How many of us would compare to the people in Jesus day?

The greatest deception of the human mind in Christ’s day was that a mere assent to the truth constitutes righteousness. . . . The darkest chapters of history are burdened with the record of crimes committed by bigoted religionists. (DA 309.2)

29. Read Matthew 5:48. Doesn’t this text seem impossible? It needs to be understood in its context. (Matthew 5:43-48) Ellen White said something very important about this text which very few seem to have recognized.

God’s ideal for His children is higher than the highest human thought can reach. “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” This command is a promise. (DA 311.2)

30. This understanding is particularly significant in light of the subtlety of the original Greek of this passage. Of course, Jesus was speaking Aramaic rather than Greek. But, the subtle Greek could be taken to read either: “You will be perfect,” or “You must be perfect.” The two Greek forms are spelled exactly the same in this sentence. Edgar J. Goodspeed captured the essence of this verse when he translated it: “You are to be perfect.” It is indeed not only a command but a promise.

31. Try to imagine how you would have responded if you had been in Jesus’s audience at the first giving of these admonitions. Would you think that Jesus was being soft on sin? Or, perhaps, that He was raising the bar impossibly high?

32. Do we really understand how damaging sin is? We are surrounded by sin, almost drowning in it all the time. Unfortunately, we have become quite comfortable with it and in some cases even loving it. Because of the misrepresentations of religionists in the past, we have almost reached the place where we fear God while we love sin. That is exactly the opposite of what our attitude should be. Based on Scripture, we should fear sin and love God.

33. What do you think? How do you feel about these six antitheses that Jesus talked about: Murder (Matt. 5:21-26), adultery (vss. 27-30), divorce (vss. 31, 32), oaths (vss. 33-37), retaliation (vss. 38-42), and love toward enemies (vss. 43-47)? If we are able to comprehend and take seriously the warning against damaging ourselves mentally by sinning, could we reach the place where we learn to do right just because it is right?

34. We are all tempted. Every one of us gives in to some temptation at least occasionally. Jesus was also tempted, but He did not sin. Where is the subtle line between temptation and sin? Do we know how to avoid crossing that line? If we could learn that lesson, it might transform our lives!

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Last Modified: March 2, 2014

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