

"This Is the Law and the Prophets"

by Eric Lyons, M.Min.

Most people who are familiar with the Bible would agree that Matthew chapters 5-7, often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, contain some of the most memorable sayings in the world. Jesus' list of beatitudes (5:3-12), His instruction to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (7:12, NIV), and His parable of the wise man and the foolish man (7:24-27) often are recalled even by those who rarely (if ever) read the Bible. When people implement these principles and rules that Jesus taught nearly 2,000 years ago, individuals grow stronger, families become more united, and society becomes a better place in which to live.

Sadly, however, the most famous "sermon" in the world also has become one of the most misunderstood and most abused sermons ever delivered. "Judge not, that you be not judged" (7:1) is quoted to "prove" that we never can judge anyone at anytime (cf. John 7:24). The narrow and difficult way to heaven that **few** will find often is discounted by the idea that nearly **everyone** will have eternal life (7:13-14). And millions of people have changed Jesus' statement, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven" (7:21), to "Just accept Jesus into your heart and you will be saved."

Another misconception of the Sermon on the Mount revolves around some of the contrasts Jesus made. Six times in Matthew 5 it is recorded that Jesus contrasted what "**was** said" to what "**I** say." Many believe that Jesus was contrasting the old law of Moses (what "was said") with the new law of Christ (what "I say"). Whereas Jesus taught that it was wrong to be angry with a brother without a cause (5:22-26), many contend that the old law taught only murder as being wrong and not the emotions (such as anger) that lead to murder (5:21). Supposedly the law of Christ went a step further than the Law of Moses. According to this line of thinking, the old law taught individuals to take personal retribution on those who wronged them (5:38) and to hate their enemies (5:43), while the new law taught to resist retaliation (5:39-42) and to love your enemies (5:44). In contrasting the Law of Moses and the righteousness of the kingdom that Jesus would require, the point frequently is made that the old law was concerned only with the **actions** of man, whereas the new law is concerned about the **heart** of man.

The first problem with this line of thinking is that Jesus never said He was contrasting His teachings with the old law. Instead, Jesus made statements such as: (1) "you have heard that it was said to those of old" (5:21,27); (2) "furthermore it has been said" (5:31); (3) "again you have heard that it was said to those of old" (5:33); and (4) "you have heard that it was said" (5:38,43). If Jesus were referring to what Moses had commanded in the old law itself, likely a different wording would have been used. For example, at other times, when Jesus definitely was referring to what the law actually said, He made such statements as "it is written" (Matthew 4:4,7,10) and "Moses commanded" (Matthew 8:4). [Notice that these phrases occur in the chapters immediately before and after the Sermon on the Mount.] Instead of using phrases like these to show that He was referring to the Law of Moses, Jesus repeatedly spoke about what "was said." He never mentioned who said it, only that it had been said.

Another dilemma that arises when one teaches that Jesus merely was contrasting the old law with the new law is that Jesus referred to some statements that simply are not to be found in the Old Testament. For instance, in Matthew 5:21 He said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder,' and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment." The phrase "and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment" is found nowhere in the Old Testament. Likewise, when Jesus stated, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,'" He could not have been quoting from the old law because the old law never said to "hate your enemy."

So what was Jesus doing if He was not contrasting the old law with the new law? The answer to this question is found in the immediate context of this passage where Jesus stated: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets, I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.... I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17,20). The comparisons Jesus made throughout the rest of the chapter were between the **traditional/oral interpretation and application of the Law of Moses** (not the **revealed written Law of Moses**) and the righteousness of the kingdom that Jesus would require of His disciples (under the new law). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expounded the **real** meaning of the original law as it was intended. He applied it correctly, and "the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29). The scribes and Pharisees had failed in their attempts to explain the law correctly, whereas Jesus explained and applied its real meaning and exposed the error of the "learned." This point is illustrated perfectly by one of Jesus' statements recorded in chapter 7: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for **this is the Law and the prophets**" (v.12, emp. added). Jesus was not instituting a new commandment; rather He was explaining that doing "to others what you would have them do to you" is a summary expression of all that the Old Testament required (Barnes).

Although many people in the religious world teach that in His oft'-quoted sermon Jesus simply was contrasting the old law with the new law, the context indicates that Jesus actually was reacting, not to the law itself, but to the way the law had been misinterpreted and abused. The Old Testament did not encourage or allow a person to be angry with his brother without a cause or to covet another's wife (cf. Proverbs 6:18; Exodus 20:17), but, sadly, many of the Jews had interpreted the law in such a way. In His masterful explanation of the law, Jesus exposed the error of the scribes and Pharisees and preached the righteousness demanded of those who wish to enter the kingdom of heaven. Even though we no longer are under the old law today (Hebrews 8:7-13; Colossians 2:14; etc.), what a blessing it is read it (cf. Romans 15:4) and to learn from the Master's perfect interpretation of it. Like Ezra and others from long ago, Jesus "gave the sense [of the law], and helped them to understand the reading" (cf. Nehemiah 8:8).

REFERENCE

Barnes, Albert (1997), *Barnes' Notes* (Electronic Database: BibleSoft).

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