

You Said, But I Say...

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time. . . . But I say unto you. . . .” – Matthew 5:21,22

The great preacher of the nineteenth century, Henry Ward Beecher, once spoke of a clock in his church that would not keep good time – it ran either too fast or too slow. He made constant adjustments to the clock month after month in an attempt to get it right. It became a standard topic of conversation in the church. Finally, in desperation he placed a sign on the clock that said, “Don't blame the hands, the trouble lies deeper.”

That illustration is quite appropriate against the background of the Sermon on the Mount. Rabbinical tradition had developed a system of righteousness based on external regulations and ceremonies. Jesus begins the Sermon by confronting what their religious system taught with eight ‘blesseds’ in the Beatitudes, stressing the attitude of the heart – the inner man – as necessary prerequisites for entrance in the Kingdom. As a result of those internal qualities, Jesus emphasized the vital importance of Kingdom citizens being a salty preservative and influence, as well as a light, exposing the spiritual darkness of this world. Jesus came not to render the Law null and void, but to re-emphasize and redefine God's Old Testament commandments which tradition and man-made ‘add-ons’ had corrupted, exposing their faulty principles and motivations which had replaced God's Word. Granted, actions are important, however, the significant principle here is the attitude behind the act. In fact, this is the highlight of the entire Sermon. The importance of a changed, renewed heart was not just a New Testament principle: **“All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives.”** [Prov. 16:2] **“I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.”** [Jer. 17:10] **“I am He who searches the minds and hearts...”** [Rev. 2:23] **“For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.”** [2Chron. 16:9]

The scribes and Pharisees had lowered God's standard of righteousness by reducing it to outward formalities and performances, laying heavy burdens on those they taught. They were obviously more concerned with being ceremonial than moral. The great Scottish minister and theologian Patrick Fairbairn states, “The scribes and Pharisees of that age had completely inverted the order of things. Their carnality and self-righteousness had led them to exalt the precepts respecting ceremonial observances to the highest place and to throw the duties inculcated in the Ten Commandments comparatively into the background.” Jesus was reminding the hearers of the original and only Divine acceptable standard. He was saying, “God's standard is higher than yours!” – words that should cause much of professing Christianity to examine itself today.

In the upcoming verses of Matthew 5, six times Jesus says words to the effect, **“You have heard that it was said by them of old time”** and six times He responds with, **“BUT I say unto you”**. [v. 21,27,31,33,38,43] He was not refuting or modifying the commandments of the Old Testament, the Law of Moses, or any portion of Scripture. Note that the verse says “it was said BY them” (the better translation) not “it was said TO them.” In each case Jesus is making reference to the rabbinical, traditional teaching – contrasting human teaching with the Word of God. This is a pivotal point in the Sermon, for here the Lord gives examples or illustrations of how God's righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees using the subjects of murder, sexual sin, divorce, speaking the truth, retaliation, and loving others. These examples range from the protection of human life to the love of all human life, including enemies. They maintain the basic principle behind Jesus' teaching here; that every area of our lives should be characterized and measured by God's perfect standard of inner righteousness.

It is worth observing that when Jesus referred to the Scriptures, He usually used such phrases as “Moses commanded”, “the prophet Isaiah said”, or “it is written.” He was obviously revealing that their human traditions were at variance with Scripture, indicating again that God's requirement was inner purity, not simply outward compliance.

In reference to the words “You have heard that it was said”, D.M. Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes the following comment: “The condition of Judaism at the time of Christ was remarkably like that of the Church in the early sixteenth century. The Scriptures were not translated into the languages of the people. The liturgy, the prayers, the Scripture reading, and even most of the hymns and anthems were in Latin, which none of the common people knew or understood. When a priest gave a sermon or a homily, the people had nothing by which to judge what he said. They

had no idea as to whether or not his message was scriptural, **or even whether or not being scriptural was important!** (emphasis added) The Bible taught what the church said it taught. The church, therefore, placed its own authority over that of Scripture.” Unfortunately there are churches today that base much of their teaching on tradition and have subsequently departed from Scripture. Due to the lack of authoritative preaching and teaching of the Word of God, discipleship and discernment, there are those even today who do not know whether being scriptural is important. To those who admit that being scriptural is important, it is sad to observe that they fail to **“receive the word with all readiness of mind, and search the scriptures daily, whether these things are so.”** [Acts 17:11] Many only believe what the church has told them to believe. This is why it is critical to explain and expound Scripture with the intent **“to give the sense so that [the people] can understand the reading.”** [Neh. 8:8]

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees fell short of God's standard and in their ignorance they proceeded to bring men into conformity with the will of God Who they did not know. They subsequently corrupted the people's conception of God by misrepresentations, enforcing a righteousness that was purely external. This is of prime importance because the Pharisees became the chief force against Christ. They lifted the incidentals to the level of the essential and degraded the essentials which resulted in the Lord's eight curses or woes upon them in Matthew 23. Upon this division, human self-righteousness versus Divine righteousness rests the central reason for the Pharisees' pursuit to put Christ to death. G. Campbell Morgan once stated regarding this thought, “The master passion of all His doing was righteousness, not mercy, but righteousness, not pity, but purity. Mercy, yes, and pity, surely; He was infinite in His compassion and in His tenderness, but never at the expense of right, never by making peace with wrong, never by lowering the standard of Divine purity. The master passion of all His teaching, of all the wonders He wrought, of the life He lived, of the very Cross of His dying, was the establishment of righteousness, and the bringing of all things into harmony with the holiness and purity of God.”

In the upcoming articles we will study each example of heart-righteousness and the conflict between tradition and Scripture. It is a righteousness that is impossible for man to attain, yet, He that demands righteousness is also the Giver of righteousness; He Who gave the Law is also the Redeemer.

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