

Roberts' Statement Examined

First of all, let me quote what Roberts said:

The crucial factor is very clear. To what extent do we, as believers, make it our role in this life to keep the ten commandments?¹ Our Lord places great emphasis on the ten commandments, or moral law, as we correctly call it. He makes clear here that he did 'not come to destroy' the ten commandments, but to 'fulfil' them.

There are three forms of law in the Old Testament: (i) ceremonial; (ii) judicial; and (iii) moral. The first two of these laws are now out of date and are not to be considered now as our rule of duty... But Christ here, in his Sermon on the Mount, makes it clear that the moral law is still our duty and has not been outdated by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets' (Matt. 5:17).

There is a crucially important point to be learned here. As sinners we are justified by faith only, and not by our good works... However, we must not overlook what Christ is here teaching us: 'Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law' (Matt. 5:18).

How are we to interpret these words? In this way. As Christians, we are justified by Christ's atoning death on the cross. Our 'good works' have no place whatever in our justification. But the believer who is now justified has it as his duty to keep the ten commandments. We, as God's believing people, are not saved by the moral law. But when we are saved by grace, it is our duty carefully to keep the moral law. The measure in which [the]²

¹ Throughout, Roberts used upper case 'Ten Commandments', thus (whether intentionally or not, I cannot say) subtly elevating the ten above the other 600 or so. Whether or not this is justified needs to be thought about. Small matter? Little foxes, as we know... (Song 2:15).

² Original 'this'.

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believer observes God's moral law is the measure in which, as Christians, we have been obedient in this life to the ten commandments.³ Our wisdom as God's people, therefore, is to teach ourselves and others who are converted to keep the ten commandments carefully and conscientiously. There is surely no other way in which the words of our Lord here, in Matthew 5:19, can be understood. In a word, it is clear he is teaching us that, though we are justified by faith without obedience to the moral law,⁴ once we are justified, the rule of life for us all as his people is to keep his moral law. The importance of our doing good works is made clear by James (Jas. 2:20,24)...

The words of Christ here in the Sermon on the Mount tell us that, as saved sinners, we need to live to the glory of God. The more we do so, by obeying the ten commandments, the greater will be our reward. It is our wisdom, therefore, to 'do and teach them' (Matt. 5:19). As our reward, we will, in the day of judgment, 'be called great' in the kingdom of heaven.

So said Roberts.⁵

³ I allow Roberts' confusing use of pronouns to stand. His meaning is clear.

⁴ I am not nitpicking, but Roberts was not careful enough here. Ignoring, for the moment, his use of 'moral', while it is true that the believer is justified without the works of the law (Rom. 3:20,28; 4:5; Gal. 2:16), his justification depends absolutely of Christ's own obedience to the law.

⁵ This was not his only go at the passage. See his 'Three Forms of Law', *The Banner of Truth*, December 2006. His slipshod paper contained self-contradiction, caricature, question-begging and circular argument. As for 'the moral law', Roberts was categorical: 'In the order of Scripture, moral law comes first (Ex. 20)', that 'God is said to have written the moral law on the heart of man' (Rom. 2:15), and that 'the moral law is of great use to us as believers. It is our rule of life' – this last, a statement of enormous import, one which requires proof, of course, not just assertion. The sabbath, as always, is the nut which has to be cracked. Roberts simply asserted that 'the weekly sabbath' is still in place, moving straight into the Lord's day. That this is easier to assert than to prove, everybody

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You will notice that he has been very selective in his quotation of Christ, very selective indeed: just three verses (Matt. 5:17-19) out of a sermon extending for a hundred and eleven verses!⁶ That, in itself, should be enough to set the alarm bells ringing. Three verses to reach such far-reaching conclusions, I ask you! Let me do what ought to be done, what must be done; namely, quote Christ in full, and in the immediate context:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to those of old: 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment'. But I say to you that everyone who is angry

knows. Roberts more or less assumed Eph. 2:15 and Rom. 4:9 to be 'the ceremonial law'. He rebuked those who 'introduce analogies... without clear biblical warrant'. Hmm! In the Sermon on the Mount, Roberts asserted, 'it is evident that our Lord intended to state that the moral law, as such [why 'as such'?] will remain in force till the end of the world... The context makes it clear that we are being informed about the moral law only'. I pause. What about Matt. 5:38 for a start? Is that 'the moral law'? Roberts: Jesus was 'clearing up certain falsehoods which had been taught by Jewish tradition' (Maurice Roberts 'Three Forms of Law', pp1-10. I have changed many of the upper case 'Moral Law', 'Ceremonial Law', etc.) See my *Christ Is All*. See below.

⁶ But, of course, Roberts is only following the men of Westminster, their documents playing a large part in his system; those documents are awash with – indeed, they are sinking under – the mentality of proof-texts.

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with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says: 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said: 'You shall not commit adultery'. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

It was also said: 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce'. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old: 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn'. But I say to you: Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

You have heard that it was said: 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you: Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with

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him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said: 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:17-48).

Bit different, isn't it? And not only in length.

It gets worse. Not only was Roberts highly selective in his quotation of Christ, but even in the three verses he selected he produced a very highly-edited, glossed version of what Christ actually said, putting words into the Saviour's mouth, and ending up with something very different to what the Lord actually said.⁷ Let me explain. Instead of Matthew's version, let me set out the essence of what Roberts told his readers Christ really meant them to understand. Do not miss this point. Christ, apparently, left generations of believers floundering until somebody like Roberts corrected him and used the precise terminology – which, I suppose, Christ himself ought to have used in the first place. This, in effect, is what Roberts did. I have highlighted Roberts' additions, glosses and alterations in what follows:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets [*that is, according to Roberts, the ten commandments, or, as he said we correctly call it, the moral law*]; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them... Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments [*that is, according to Roberts, the*

⁷ Echoes again of the Westminster documents. See my *Infant*. By proof-texting, one can 'prove' almost anything.

ten commandments or, as he said we correctly call it, the moral law] and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.⁸

You might justly object that when I quoted James in the previous chapter I was guilty of the very same offence that I complain of in Roberts' article; I glossed James' words. True! But in two respects – very important respects – my glossing (interpretation) differs from Roberts'. *First*, I openly admitted that is what I was doing. *Secondly*, I justified – or, at least, I tried to justify, I think I did justify – what I was doing by quoting a parallel passage of Scripture. Roberts did neither.

On what grounds did Roberts make his glosses? He did not say. (It doesn't take an Einstein, however, to detect the Westminster documents just below the surface). Roberts was not reticent in his claim justified on the basis of his glosses: 'Our Lord places great emphasis on the ten commandments, or moral law, *as we correctly call it*'. I say 'claim', singular, but there were two. While I agree that Christ drew on the ten commandments, he certainly did not confine his quotation to them, but brought in laws outside the ten (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 19:12,18; Num. 30:3; Deut. 23:22; 24:1). And as for Roberts' second claim, who says it is correct to define the ten commandments as 'the moral law'? Roberts, no doubt Calvin, and a charabanc load of Puritans, and all advocates of the Westminster documents and their offshoots, yes, but which prophet or apostle – the foundation of the *ekklēsia* (Eph. 2:20) – said it? Did Christ? *Braggadocio* is no substitute for solid exegesis and scriptural argument. It

⁸ Which, according to Roberts, is the least of the ten commandments? According to Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42, the 'least' commandments made their appearance outside the so-called moral law.

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rather reminds me of the preacher's notes: 'Argument weak here. Shout!' 'Argument weak, make huge claim!'⁹

But having made his glosses, Roberts went on to make a clutch of categorical and far-reaching assertions based on those glosses – not on what Christ actually said – without offering any scriptural justification whatsoever:

Our Lord places great emphasis on the ten commandments, or moral law, as we correctly call it.

There are three forms of law in the Old Testament: (i) ceremonial; (ii) judicial; and (iii) moral.

Christ here, in his Sermon on the Mount, makes it clear that the moral law is still our duty.

The believer who is now justified has it as his duty to keep the ten commandments... it is our duty carefully to keep the moral law. The measure in which the believer observes God's moral law is the measure in which, as Christians, we have been obedient in this life to the ten commandments.

Our wisdom as God's people... is to teach ourselves and others who are converted to keep the ten commandments carefully and conscientiously.

There is surely no other way in which the words of our Lord here, in Matthew 5:19, can be understood. In a word, it is clear he is teaching us that, though we are justified by faith without obedience to the moral law, once we are justified, the rule of life for us all as his people is to keep his moral law.

We need to live to the glory of God. The more we do so, by obeying the ten commandments, the greater will be our reward.

⁹ The Jamieson-Fausset-Brown comment on Gal. 6:13 is apposite: 'They arbitrarily selected circumcision out of the whole law, as though observing it would stand instead of their non-observance of the rest of the law'. Replace 'they' by 'Roberts', 'circumcision' by 'moral law', and 'their' by 'his readers', and you have it.

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Would Roberts give us the *scriptural* proof of those statements? *Could* he?

C.H.Spurgeon's warning against playing ducks and drakes with Scripture is apposite:

There is such a thing as laying a substratum of truth, and then overlaying it with human opinions... This also is concealing the words of the Holy One... The gospel of Jesus Christ is hidden by their so-called 'thought' – their own thoughts are set before the thoughts of God. What shall we say to such thinking but that it is a presumptuous setting up of human intellect above the revelation of the Lord? What shall we say of such culture but that it cultivates a pride which had better have been cut up by the roots? It conceals the words of the Holy One that fallible man may sit upon the throne of wisdom, and make his own religion, and be his own God.¹⁰

Again:

Do not try to make the gospel look fine; do not overlay it with your fine words or elaborate explanations. The gospel seed is to be put into the... heart just as it is. Get the truth concerning the Lord Jesus into the... minds. Make them know, not what you can say about the truth, but what the truth itself says. It is wicked to take the gospel and make a peg of it to hang our old clothes upon. The gospel is not a boat to be freighted with human thoughts, fine speculations, scraps of poetry, and pretty tales. No, no. The gospel is the thought of God; in and of itself it is the message which the soul needs. It is the gospel itself which will grow...

I say take these truths and set them forth to the mind, and see what will come of it. Sow the very truth; not your reflections on the truth, not your embellishments of the truth, but the truth itself. This is to be brought into contact with the mind, for the truth is the seed, and the human mind is the soil for it to grow in.

These remarks of mine are very plain and trite; and yet everything depends upon the simple operation

¹⁰ C.H.Spurgeon sermon 1471 'Concealing the Words of God'.

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described. Nearly everything has been tried in preaching of late, except the plain and clear statement of the glad tidings...

The gospel is so plain a matter that our superior people are weary of it and look out for something more difficult of comprehension. People nowadays are like the person who liked to hear the Scriptures 'properly confounded'; or like the other who said: 'You should hear our minister dispense with the truth'. Sowing seed is work too ordinary for the moderns; they demand new methods. But, beloved, we must not run after vain inventions; our one business is to sow the word of God in the minds.¹¹

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But all this is merely skirmishing with the real issue in this matter of context. I draw attention to my use of 'immediate' a few moments ago: 'Let me do what ought to be done, what must be done; namely, quote Christ in full, and in the *immediate* context', I said. True, but not the whole story. The fact is, we need to take this question of the context further and look at Christ's entire Sermon on the Mount, its place in the Gospel of Matthew, and hence in the new covenant. Get the big picture first of all, before probing into the particulars. Do not forget the final paragraph in the extract from Lloyd-Jones I quoted earlier:

The tendency to isolate subjects from their context in the Scriptures... ultimately... regards the Scriptures as but a collection of statements about particular subjects. So one atomises the Scripture and forgets the whole;

¹¹ C.H.Spurgeon sermon 2110. I acknowledge that Spurgeon was speaking of the need to address children with the gospel, but the application to the matter in hand is patent. It is not just 'new systems' which get round Scripture; they can date from the 1640s.

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and, surely, the whole is more important than the parts.¹²

Did Roberts do that? Did he look at the big picture?

Alas, he simply ignored the big picture – it did not exist or count in his scheme. But the big picture must never be ignored! Especially here. What do I mean? What is Christ doing in Matthew 5 – 7, in his Sermon on the Mount? Is he taking the Mosaic law and explaining it in detail for his disciples? Is he taking the Mosaic law and getting rid of all the glosses and traditions heaped upon it by countless Jewish scribes and rabbis, and getting back to the original? Is he enforcing the Mosaic law? Or what?

It is time to look at the Sermon on the Mount, unfettered by man's presuppositions.

¹² Lloyd-Jones p245. As a physician, Lloyd-Jones knew full-well that it was very bad medical practice to jump to details of a patient's symptoms before looking at the patient as a whole. How much more does this principle apply when looking at Scripture!