



March 11, 2007

The Uncomfortable Christian

As we began the Lenten season two weeks ago we looked at our heritage a heritage that follows a church year that is designed to annually remind us of the great things God has done for mankind. We also had a little biblical reality preaching about our heritage and that reality preaching showed us that we have a heritage of sin and Lent reminds us of that. It reminds us of our sin so that we are prepared to see our savior on the cross on Good Friday and to see Him rising from the dead on Easter. Last week heard Christ's call to repentance and as you remember to repent means to confess, ask for forgiveness and change. If we do repent and change we are to bear fruit, grow like a mustard seed, be like yeast and cause a whole loaf of bread to rise. Yet all of these are symbolic. In reality what is meant by bearing fruit? The answer is very simple, Christian living.

I remember Jim Berner saying that we wouldn't teach a religion class in our school he insisted it would be a Christian Living class. In fact, the new members class that he did here at Zion was called Living the New Life. So what is Christian living? What are the components for living the new life? Well you might not like to hear what the components are. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:48, which is towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "Be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect." You've heard me say it before holy macaroni! Perfect? Yes, perfect. What is interesting is that this does come toward the end of Christ's sermon on Christian living, the sermon we call Sermon on the Mount. The sermon that has the nine blessed, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek and so on. He then gives two more symbolic descriptions of the Christian he says we are to be like salt and we are to be like light but then he gets into the nitty gritty of what it all means.

It begins in Matthew Chapter 5 verse 17 where he says, "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. I tell you the truth until

heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.” Christ came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Then He says, “I tell you the truth.” Sounds familiar doesn’t it? It’s exactly what He said to the thief on the cross. To literally translate this, though to put into English it wouldn’t make much sense to us because literally it says, “For amen I say to you.” And “amen”, refers to ideas of truth and faithfulness. It occurs in statements to declare affirm or confirm a solemn truth. So when Jesus says to the thief, “I tell you the truth today you will be with me in paradise” He was saying I affirm, confirm and declare to you a most solemn truth, today you will be with me in paradise. So too when Jesus says in verse 18, “I tell you the truth until heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.” He is saying I affirm, I confirm I declare to you that until heaven and earth pass away, and that can be read judgment day, when God destroys all that has been invaded and infected by sin not the smallest letter nor the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. But you might ask, “well, what does He mean by smallest letter or stroke of a pen?” Well, what we translate as smallest letter is actually one Greek word; and its only four letters long, “iota” from which we get the English phrase, “it doesn’t make one iota of difference.” You see, iota it means “very small” the smallest so small that it doesn’t make a difference. But in the case of the law an iota makes all the difference.

He re-emphasizes that point when he says, “not the least stroke of a pen was called a horn. It was an embellishment on a Hebrew letter. For instance in the Hebrew alphabet the written form of the letters B and K are almost identical so to distinguish them you use a horn, a slight curve to the letter or the addition of a dot. Only the most formal writings would use this so that there was no chance of misinterpretation. Jesus is again saying not even the smallest part which seems insignificant in the law is to be ignored or forgotten and so He warns the people anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Now you might think that the Pharisees would like this and after all they had taken the observance of the law right down to the iota or horn.

But then Jesus shocks everyone in verse 20; He continues and says, "For I tell you then unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Yes, the teachers of the law the Pharisees had taken the law and they were so righteous in their observing of it they divided into 613 commandments then they had broken those into 248 positive and 365 negative laws, they debated what they called the heavier laws, for instance, when the young man comes to Jesus in Luke 10:27 and he asks Jesus, "What must I do to be saved?" Jesus asked him, "What is the greatest commandment?" Well that's the heaviest commandment and the man knew it, you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, your soul and your mind. There were other commandments that they would consider to be light, ones that really didn't matter. In fact, the lightest was considered to be Deuteronomy 22:6 that tells the people if you take young birds or eggs from a nest don't disturb the mother. They didn't think that was all that important but see what Jesus is saying is that when it comes to what God says every last bit is important. What Jesus is about to do is define the most important aspects of the law. He's going to the letter of the law, which people play around with go to the spirit of the law, which deals with love, justice, mercy and faithfulness and He begins with the sixth commandment. He says, "You have heard that it was said." That right there ties us back to the Pharisees, the teachers of the law this is where people have heard it is said. "You have heard it was said to the people long ago, do not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to justice." This totally agrees with what the bible says Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:7 ten commandments you shall not kill. In Genesis 9:6, "If someone sheds the blood of another man by man his blood will be shed."

But then Jesus now goes to the further interpretation the spirit He says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Again, anyone who says to his brother, "raca", is answerable to the Sanhedrin but anyone who says, "you fool", will be in danger of the fire of hell. If you're angry you're subject to be judged. If you say, "raca", which means empty headed or block head its against the law. In fact, if you say "fool" or "idiot" or "moron" you are in danger of the fire of hell. Very interesting there; the word that is interpreted as hell, it's a Greek word, it's the abode of body and soul after judgment day. In the New Testament the Greek Hades is often used too but that's the place spirits dwell before judgment

day. Gehinnon, which is the name of a deep ravine south of Jerusalem, 2 Kings 23;10 tells us that this is where the children of Israel and one of the darkest chapters of their history turned from God and began to offer human sacrifices yes, their babies to Molech the God of the Ammonites, Josiah destroyed this temple and it became a sort of perpetually burning city dump. Gehenna, hell, is the final judgment where all is laid waste where there is no hope where nothing remains but smoke going up.

Wow, that's kind of scary but Jesus doesn't stop He gives the answer to the law He goes to the positive. He doesn't just say don't hate, don't speak evil, don't murder He says, "Therefore if you are offering your gift the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother then come and offer your gift." And again we miss so much as its translated because when He says "you are offering", He goes from the plural, earlier He says you have heard it said that means all of you, but when He says, "therefore if you", now He goes personal. To do what Jesus is doing here in English he'd have to say you then point a finger at each person here, now wouldn't that be a little uncomfortable? If the preacher was pointing the finger at each person and saying, "you, you, you", he is saying let each man examine his heart. That heart must be filled with love at all times not anger, not hatred there is no room for a grudge, instead, if those are present before you bow your head to pray, before you put a check in your offering envelope or drop an offering in the plate, before you even come to worship Jesus says go and be reconciled and restore the peace and love that once was there. Jesus is simply saying first thing first. Be right with others and then you can come back and be right with me.

You might feel a little uncomfortable right now. Maybe that change to the personal you hit home. If so you're feeling the call of the Holy Spirit. Take care of it today; don't let Satan rationalize away what is right. Go and be reconciled today and feel the joy that comes with being right with God. Maybe you're saying to yourself, "Matt you just don't understand." Its almost like Jesus anticipated that so he continues, "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge may hand you over to the officer and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

One commentator put it this way, "To summarize in verses 25-26 it is as if Jesus were saying Be not surprised about the urgency of my command that you be reconciled for should it be that you are to pass from this life with a heart still at variance with your brother a condition that you have not even tried to change that wrong would testify against you in the day of judgment. Moreover, dying with that spirit of hatred still in your heart you will never escape from the prison of hell." The question may be asked, "Does the burden rest on me alone and not at all on the person who opposes me?" Or wording it differently, "Granted that I am a sinner so at least my opponent views me, is it not his duty to forgive?" The answer is given in such passages as Matthew 6:12, 6:14, 18:21-35, these same passages also imply that when I have done all in my power to bring about a reconciliation and the opponent still refuses to be fair and where necessary to be forgiving the guilt will rest on him alone.

You see, when it comes down to it God expects you, that's the personal you, whether you did wrong or you've been wrong to take the first step. So in the words of the Nike commercial or James 1:27, "Just do it." You might say, "I just can't", "Its just too uncomfortable", you know what you've heard what Jesus has to say. What did James, the brother of Jesus say? "Don't merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says." Dear brothers and sister in Christ the first part of Christian living is to be reconciled to our brothers our sisters and even maybe even to complete strangers who have wronged us or we have wronged. When we make things right we are now following the spirit of the law and we are now walking as a Christian and bearing fruit. May the Lord grant us the will, the power and the desire to do as He says.

In our Savior's name, Amen