

Matthew 5:17-20

Avoiding Wrong Thinking about the Kingdom of Heaven

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets... – v. 17

In this new section of the sermon on the mount our Lord brings forth a very important lesson that pertains to kingdom living. The lesson simply stated is this: right thinking leads to right living. If we would draw from the benefits that our ours as subjects of the kingdom of heaven then we must think right. If we would avoid the pitfall of self-righteous pride and hypocrisy or if we would avoid the scourge of religious bondage then we must avoid thinking wrong.

To the extent that we manage to think right – to that same degree we enjoy our blessings and we rise above the world in the power of those blessings. We are comforted – we are filled – we obtain mercy and we see God with the eye of faith. We endeavor to spread peace because we live in the blessing of the gospel of peace. And nothing can rob us of God's favor. We may be – indeed we're taught to expect that we'll be reviled and persecuted and slandered but these things cannot rob us of God's favor – provided that we learn to think right and avoid thinking wrong.

And so the Lord addresses the way we're to avoid thinking when He begins v. 17 by saying *think not*. Here is something you are not to think. Here is a wrong way of thinking that must be avoided or overcome. He addresses the wrong way of thinking first and then He addresses the right way to think at the end of the verse.

There is one other very important thing that we must note in v. 17. We see in this verse that for the very first time in the sermon on the mount the focus has shifted – shifted in the sense that someone else is now the center of our attention. Up to this point the focus has been on the subject of the kingdom of heaven. Christ has been saying certain things about the character of the true subject of the kingdom of heaven. We've seen this in the beatitudes. The one who is truly a subject of the kingdom of heaven will be characterized as one who is poor in spirit, and one who mourns, and one who is meek etc.

And after describing the character of the subject of the kingdom of heaven Christ then addresses the matter of how His subjects are to function. They're to be the salt of the earth and they're to be the light of the world. Now in v. 17 the Lord shifts the focus of His sermon from the subject of the kingdom of heaven to Himself. We are now, therefore, taken up with this all important subject of thinking upon Christ.

And it's in connection with how we think on Him – specifically how we think on His kingdom mission – that we must be very careful that we avoid thinking wrong and that we make sure that we think right. *Think not* He says in v. 17 *that I am come to destroy the law and the prophets*. Before His ministry on earth was through He would be accused along those very lines. He would be accused of being a law breaker. He would be accused of being a Sabbath desecrater. He would be accused of blasphemy. He would be accused of conspiring to destroy the Jewish temple and by implication the worship associated with

that temple. He would be so much at odds with the many ways that the Pharisees had subverted the law of God with their traditions that to the non-thinking, go with the flow, conformist, He might be easily viewed as One whose mission was to destroy the law.

And in the days that would follow Christ's earthly ministry – throughout the course of church history the followers of Christ would be and indeed are accused of subverting the law of God by their doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. *Such a doctrine leads to lawless living* – the accusation would say. *We are slanderously reported as saying Let us do evil that good may come* Paul would write in Rom. 3:8.

And, unfortunately, it must be sadly admitted that even in Christian circles there are those that think that it's inconsistent with grace to allow any place for the law of God. The very thing that Christ tells us to think not – turns out to be the very way that some Christians do think when they endeavor to teach that the law of God was for an earlier dispensation but most certainly not for this present dispensation.

And so church history reveals to us a pendulum swing between antinomianism which does away with the law completely to the other extreme of Pharisaical legalism that fundamentalism is often accused of which makes the law, or perhaps I should say, makes traditions appended to the law as heavy a yoke of bondage as the Pharisees made it in Christ's time despite the gospel of grace.

All of which underscores the importance of the maxim I stated a moment ago that right thinking will lead to right living – and wrong thinking will lead to licentiousness or bondage or both. There is a sense in which you could say that these verses that we've now come to in the sermon on the mount convey to us the very essence of the issue of kingdom living. The success we'll obtain in knowing our blessings or the lack of success and the weight of our bondage will depend in large measure on a right understanding of Christ's kingdom mission. You could say that these verses provide us with a very concise and yet comprehensive view of the entire matter and what it boils down to is wrong or right thinking with regard to the purpose of Christ's coming.

So this is what I want to draw your attention to today – the issue of wrong or right thinking regarding Christ's kingdom mission. Let me frame this theme in a question and then endeavor to answer that question. The question is simply this:

How can we avoid wrong thinking and engage in right thinking with regard to Christ's kingdom mission?

I. We Must Appreciate the Aim of Christ's Mission

That mission is stated both negatively and positively in v. 17. *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets.* I've touched upon this negative statement already in my introduction. Let me just reiterate here that we are never to associate the coming of Christ with the destruction or the nullification or the suspension or the loosening of the

law. The law will not be nullified or set aside. On the contrary – Christ makes it a point of emphasis in the next verse that as long as heaven and earth remain in existence *one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled*. Not even the tiniest particle will be relaxed or set aside – that’s the meaning of a jot and tittle. We’re dealing with the smallest Hebrew letter and even the smallest part of a Hebrew letter. There’s the purpose of Christ’s coming – negatively stated. And in that negative statement we see the kind of thinking that we’re to avoid.

By way of contrast – we’re told in v. 17 that *Christ came not to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil*. There’s the positive side to Christ’s kingdom mission. He came for the express purpose of fulfilling the law. The law will not pass *till all be fulfilled* He says again in v. 18.

And in this simple yet sublime statement I believe you find the heart of the gospel. Christ came to fulfil the law. Christ came, as the second Adam, according to Paul in 1Cor. 15:22. Indeed Adam, according to Paul in Rom. 5:14 was the figure of him that was to come. What was required of Adam in the garden of Eden? Was it not obedience? And what did Adam fail to do? You know the story, I’m sure – he failed to obey. How thankful we should be that Adam was the type and that Christ is the anti-type. For Christ succeeded in doing what Adam failed to do – i.e. Christ fulfilled the law by rendering obedience to that law. He was *obedient unto death* Paul writes in Phil. 2:8 and what that statement means is that His life and death must be viewed in the context of His obedience. It is the obedience, or the merit, of His righteous life and the righteous payment made by His obedient death that is imputed to us in our justification.

I find it amazing and troubling that this simple and sublime statement of Christ is actually a matter of controversy. There are those, you see, who limit the application of what Christ says in this verse to His teaching ministry. In other words, according to this interpretation of v. 17, Christ fulfilled the law by completing the teaching regarding the law which was only begun by Moses. It has nothing to do with Christ’s obedience – it only makes reference to what Christ taught about the law.

One article I read on these verses which seeks to interpret the verses from the theological perspective that’s called *New Covenant Theology* makes much of the fact that because Christ is greater than Moses and Christ possesses more authority than Moses – it becomes Christ’s prerogative to do whatever He wants with the law. If He wants to make it more strict – then that’s His right. If He wants to loosen a few of the standards – He can do that too. In fact this theological view teaches that this is exactly what Christ has done regarding the 4th commandment which pertains to keeping the Sabbath. Or if Christ wants to adjust a few of the laws of Moses in any way, shape, or form – that’s His right because He is greater than Moses and has the authority, therefore, to do so.

This view of the law, of course, completely overlooks the nature of the law. There is no connection in such a view of the law between the nature of God and the commandments that He gives. The law cannot be viewed the way Paul views it in Rom. 7:12 as holy, and

just, and good. The law becomes a mere set of arbitrary rules that the Creator of men decided to invent in order to impose them on His creatures. And in such an instance it is the Creator's prerogative to adjust those laws however He sees fit by making them more strict or less strict or by nullifying them altogether.

Now if such a view of the law is not appalling enough, the author of this article on New Covenant Theology goes on to say regarding the view that fulfillment refers to Christ's obedience that *The older Reformed view that the "fulfillment" in view is Jesus' active obedience to the Mosaic stipulations has largely -- and rightly -- fallen out of vogue.*

When I read statements such as this it leads me to sigh for the state of the church in America today. Is it any wonder that the effectiveness of the church's ministry has so degenerated when the very heart of the gospel is viewed as being unfashionable to true scholarly minds? Is it any wonder that the church has to look to so many worldly endeavors in order to promote itself because it has so little to offer in terms of the gospel?

I much prefer what may be viewed as the inspired commentary that Paul gives us on Christ's words in Rom. 5 where he writes in v. 19 *For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.* Thank God this morning that Christ fulfilled the law by rendering obedience to it. Thank God this morning that you and I are joined to Christ and by virtue of our union to Him His obedience is counted as ours. How else will our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Shall we flatter ourselves into thinking that we're more righteous than they? Shall we deceive ourselves by trying to convince ourselves that we can succeed where they failed?

The doctrine of Christ's obedience as our Covenant Head is at the heart of the gospel and why anyone would want to deny it is quite beyond me. I can think of no more fitting an application for the church at large in America today than the words of Jonah which he gives us in Jonah 2:8 *They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.*

Is this not what the church in large measure has done today? She observes lying vanities by holding such a low view of the law of God. And she forsakes her own mercy by her refusal to see Christ as the One who fulfilled the law of God by rendering obedience to that law. I am quite happy to say in response to a view of the gospel that would sap it of the blessing that it conveys – *give me the older Reformed view that has fallen out of vogue!* Give me the blessing of justification by faith and I'll have peace with God.

Let me see my Saviour living for me, dying for me, rendering obedience to God for me and I'll be moved to reverence, humility, and gratitude. Let me understand the imputation of Christ's righteousness – a righteousness wrought by His life and death and I'll reign in life Paul says in Rom. 5:17.

May the Lord help us, then, to think right with regard to Christ's coming and to avoid thinking wrong. *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.* Our motivation for thinking right is all the more heightened when we consider next that not only must we appreciate the aim in Christ's Mission but:

II. We Must be Impressed with the Reason for His Mission

His mission, as we've seen, is clearly stated in v. 17. Would you note the connection between v. 17 with v. 18 by the word *for*. Here is why it was essential for Christ to fulfill the law for us by His life and death *For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law...*

Contrary to the thinking of some that Christ would or could arbitrarily make adjustments to the law based on His authority over the law – the whole point that Christ is making in this verse is that the law of God is permanent. It makes no difference how many years pass. It makes no difference how many different dispensations may come and go. The standard that Christ utilizes to illustrate the permanence of the law is the very existence of heaven and earth. *Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law.*

If you wake up tomorrow morning, therefore, and look out the window and discover that the earth is still in place – that the sun has risen again – that the sky is blue and the grass is green and that the world is still moving around the sun and still rotating on its axis then you can be sure that the law of God is still in place and has not passed.

We've gone over this before – some time ago when I did some studies on the 10 commandments based on the shorter catechism in the adult Sunday School class. You may recall the point that I've made and reiterated from time to time that the best way to determine whether or not a particular commandment applies is to analyze that commandment not in terms of what dispensation it was given but in terms of what the commandment teaches about God. What is the theology of the commandment? – in other words.

Why are we commanded to have no other gods before the true and living God? Is it because such a commandment was fitting for a previous dispensation? Is it because God saw fit to impose such a rule once upon a time but He no longer sees fit to impose such a rule today? Or is it because there are no other gods than the true and living God? Could it be that all other gods are false gods and the worship of false gods amounts to sinful idolatry?

Why did God ever give the commandment that no graven image was to be made in connection with our worship of Him? Did it have anything to do with the fact that God is a Spirit and every attempt to fashion an image of God was and is so unbecoming to His nature that it constitutes gross sin? Did the commandment have anything to do with the transcendence of God – emphasizing that He is far above and beyond what mere mortal men can comprehend – so much so that it becomes sinful to try to fashion an image after Him – Or was it simply a rule given to test people of a previous dispensation to see whether or not they would obey?

I think you can see the point that I'm now making and have made before that the law of God reflects the nature or the truth of God. And what this teaches us is that so long as God

is unchangeable then the laws that spring from God's nature are unchangeable also. We view these laws as moral laws – not because they're arbitrary rules – but because they spring from the very nature of God Himself. And because these laws are unchangeable the kingdom mission of Christ was absolutely necessary. Since the laws of God are unchangeable, you see, the sentence that the laws of God carry is unchangeable also.

- Gen. 2:17 *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*
- Eze 18:4 *Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.*
- Rom. 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death.*

Do you begin to appreciate the necessity of Christ's kingdom mission? The law of God is permanent which means that the sentence for the broken law is permanent. And in the verses that follow throughout the rest of Mt. 5 we will come to see how strong that sentence is against us.

We may flatter ourselves by saying we've never murdered – but Christ will show that unjust anger harbored toward another man is murder in the heart. And we may flatter ourselves into thinking that we've never committed adultery – but Christ will show that lust harbored toward another woman is adultery of the heart.

You might argue that Christ's aim in the verses that follow our text is the same as Paul's aim in the first two and a half chapters of Romans which is to strip away any and every form of self righteousness and to leave sinners where they must come to see themselves which is guilty before God.

A permanent law, you see, carries a permanent and irreversible sentence. We're guilty before God and we're hopeless and helpless to do anything about such a sentence. Christ will not and indeed in a sense cannot simply change the law without compromising His own character. It's interesting to note here that if Christ could simply exercise His authority to change the law – there would never have been any need for Him to endure His sufferings. Why die to save men when all He need do is relax the standards of the law to save men?

Because the law is permanent and the sentence of death irreversible there was no way for man to save himself and the only way God could save sinners and still remain true to Himself would be for Christ to take on His kingdom mission of becoming a man and as a man rendering that obedience for us – as our Covenant Head and as our substitute and thus bring not the nullification of God's law but bring rather satisfaction to God's law through His fulfilling that law in His life and death.

The reason that Christ's kingdom mission was necessary, then, is because of the very nature of the law of God. We need to avoid thinking wrong when it comes to the nature of the law of God and we need to think right in terms of what Christ came to accomplish. Thank God that He came to fulfill the law and that He did just that in His life and death.

Let me conclude by saying that not only must we avoid wrong thinking and engage in right thinking regarding Christ's aim and the reason for that aim. But finally:

III. We Must Realize the Intended Effect of His Mission

Notice what Christ says in v. 19 - *Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

There is found in this verse a connection with what precedes. Notice that Christ says *Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments etc.* Because of the aim of Christ's mission to fulfill the law and the reason for that aim – the inflexible and permanent standard of the law – therefore you could argue that those who hold the law in low esteem – if they're saved at all – are called least in the kingdom and those who strive to keep the commandments and teach others to do so are called great.

It becomes apparent, then, that where wrong thinking is avoided and right thinking is practiced – the effect will be high esteem for the law. Indeed, the law turns from our adversary to our advocate by virtue of our union with Christ. Just as that law was inflexible in demanding our condemnation – so that same law, being fulfilled in Christ becomes equally inflexible in demanding our justification.

And because we've been set free from the law's condemnation – we are free to strive to keep the law. We have come to love the law. We see in the law all that is right before God and all that Christ did to save our souls. We see what we were before we fell into sin. And we see what we'll be when once we enter into glory.

I use to be amazed by the kind of statements found in Psalm 119. Statements like the one found in Ps 119:97 *O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day* – or the statement found in Ps 119:163 *I hate and abhor lying: but thy law do I love.* I use to wonder how the Psalmist could love what condemned him. How could the Psalmist love a standard that he failed to measure up to?

But when you come to appreciate the real aim in Christ's ministry which was to fulfill the law of God – then you come to appreciate how the Psalmist could love the law of God. He was set free from the dread of its condemnation. He was enabled to see it in the beauty of holiness because he was free to strive for obedience.

Do you begin to see, then, how important it is to avoid wrong thinking and how important it becomes to engage in right thinking? Wrong thinking leads to licentiousness and bondage. Wrong thinking caters to pride when the Christian flatters himself into thinking that he has or can meet the demands of the law of God. Right thinking leads to reverence and gratitude when we see One representing us doing for us what we could not do for ourselves – fulfilling the law of God. Right thinking with regard to Christ's mission sets us free from the pride and arrogance of thinking we do measure up to the standard of God's law – while at the same time delivering us from the kind of mindset that shows no

regard for God's law. And so we think right toward Christ – we think right toward the law – we think right toward ourselves and we think right regarding the will of God for our lives. The enjoyment of God's blessing springs from thinking right about Christ's person and work. To the degree that we understand and appreciate all that Christ has done in connection with coming into this world – born of a woman, made under the law – living to render obedience to the law – dying to pay our debt to the law – rising to prove that God's law is satisfied – to that same degree we become convinced that we're blessed. And in the recognition of our blessed estate our esteem for the law of God rises and we strive from the principle of humility and gratitude to follow after Christ in the obedience of faith.

This is how the gospel of the kingdom is meant to function. I wonder today if this is how it is functioning in your life? Maybe you need to adjust your thinking. Maybe you need to let go of some mistaken notions about Christ's purpose and about your purpose in following Him. *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.*

May God Himself help us, then, to avoid wrong thinking and to engage in right thinking that we may draw from the benefits of Christ's mission and follow Him in the obedience of faith.