

### C. The Ethic of the Kingdom (5:21-7:6)

In the next section of His discourse Jesus introduced the ethic of His kingdom, and He did so by means of example and comparison/contrast rather than exhaustive treatment (5:21-48). The religious/ethical life of Israel under the Law was at the heart of rabbinical study and commentary in Jesus' day. The various rabbinical schools (such as that of the rabbis Hillel and Shammai) interpreted the Law's prescriptions and commandments for their followers, instructing them in how to understand and apply those directives to their daily lives. Thus the rabbis addressed such practical concerns as family and marital relations and specifics of God's worship. These sorts of issues were central to Israel's ethical practice under the Law of Moses, and so it was fitting that Jesus should draw upon them in illuminating the ethic of His kingdom. Again, He did so by employing a technique of comparison and contrast: "*You have heard... but I say to you...*"

Given the immense influence of rabbinical and sectarian teaching on Israel's ethical framework, many have viewed Jesus' instruction in the balance of chapter five as confronting that teaching, specifically as it had progressively moved the sons of Israel away from the truths of the Law of Moses toward human traditions and prescriptions (so, for example, Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:1ff). As noted previously, this viewpoint is predominant in Reformed circles where the so-called moral law is regarded as central to the divine-human relationship in all its various expressions. The basic premise is that centuries of rabbinical speculative interpretation had corrupted the purity of God's law and Jesus was concerned to liberate the Law and restore it to its pure form.

While it's true that rabbinical and sectarian traditions had misdirected Israel's understanding and application of the Mosaic Law, *it doesn't necessarily follow that Jesus' primary – let alone sole – intent was to correct that error*. Underlying assumptions of Reformed Theology – such as the continuity of the one "covenant of grace" and the perpetuity of God's "moral law" – are more the reason for this conclusion than biblical exegesis. In fact, the way in which Jesus prefaced this section (vv. 17-20) argues decidedly against the notion that the goal of His instruction was to recover and reaffirm the Law of Moses as the essence of His kingdom's ethic.

From the Reformed perspective, Jesus' comparison/contrast formula in this section ("You have heard, but I say to you...") points to differences between the Mosaic Law as given by God and as traditionally interpreted. In this respect, much has been made of the fact that Jesus referred to what His audience had *heard* rather than what is *written* in the Scriptures. This, together with the fact that at least one of Jesus' citations deviates from its biblical form (cf. 5:43; Leviticus 19:18), is said to show conclusively that He was confronting rabbinical distortions of the Law rather than addressing the Law itself. Several observations are important in examining this conclusion:

- 1) First of all, Jesus' reference to what the multitude had *heard* doesn't in itself prove that He was addressing rabbinical errors. Almost without exception, Israel's instruction in the Scripture came through oral communication, whether in the reading of the Scripture in the synagogues or formal instruction through the recognized teachers of the Law. And undeniably much of what the sons of Israel had heard was biblically correct. This was certainly the case with the public reading of the Scripture, and Jesus Himself observed that the teaching of religious leaders couldn't be rejected simply because the teachers were themselves tainted by corruption (Matthew 23:1-3; cf. also Mark 12:18-34).

- 2) Secondly, even if it is granted that rabbinical and traditional distortions were implicated in Jesus' corrective, it doesn't follow that the point of His corrective was to clarify God's (moral) law and reconfirm it as the marrow of His kingdom's ethic. In context, the issue wasn't rabbinical corruption of specific commands associated with God's moral law; rather, *Jesus was fundamentally concerned with Israel's misreading of the relation between what the Scripture established and promised and the emergent kingdom of God.*
- The Law of Moses – including the Decalogue – served a crucial prophetic role in the movement of salvation history. As the *covenant* between God and Israel, the Law formally established and defined the relationship between the two covenanting parties: It defined for Israel what it meant to be *Israel*, detailing for the nation what it looked like for it to fulfill its covenant identity as *son of God* – Yahweh's servant, disciple, co-regent and witness in the world. In this way, and in the light of Israel's failure, it prophesied of the True Israel to come.
  - The relationship between Yahweh as Father-Lord and Israel as covenant son served the administration of His rule over His creation, and this Creator-creature dynamic is the heart of the biblical notion of the kingdom of God. This is evident first from the foundational kingdom paradigm established in Eden, but also from the Israelite kingdom as a prototypical restoration of the Edenic kingdom.
  - The Law (as also the Prophets) heralded the coming kingdom of God, and this was why the sons of Israel needed to rightly discern it. Thus Jesus' concern with rabbinical interpretive errors wasn't the rabbis' modification of the Law's moral prescriptions; *His concern was that these teachers were causing their followers to miss the true message of the Scripture, and so were directing them away from the kingdom it revealed; the kingdom now "breaking in" with His coming.*
  - From this vantage point, it is clearly irrelevant whether or not the rabbis were actually changing the Scripture. Even if they were accurately recounting its precepts and demanding obedience to its commands as written, they nonetheless misunderstood the prophetic nature and trajectory of the Law. *These who exalted and observed the Law and called others to do likewise were actually guilty of not listening to the Law and leading their disciples to follow their own disobedience.*
- 3) Moreover, to contend that Jesus was merely recovering and reasserting the moral law is to argue that His phrase, "*but I say to you*" meant effectively, "*but **Moses** said to you.*" At least with respect to the so-called moral components of the Law, this view maintains that Jesus wasn't going beyond what Moses had delivered at Sinai; He was merely bringing to light what the ensuing centuries had obscured. Though embraced by many, this interpretation doesn't well accord with Jesus' introductory comments in 5:17-18.
- Before even entering into the specific issues of vv. 21-48, Jesus had already framed His treatment of them by insisting that He had come to *fulfill* the Law. Reformed scholars agree, but tend to understand "fulfillment" in terms of full disclosure of the Law's true demands. Matthew, however, indicates otherwise.

- Fulfillment is a central theme in Matthew’s gospel, and nowhere does it refer to Jesus’ disclosure to men of their full moral obligation under the Law of Moses. Instead, this term and its cognates always refer to the realization in the person, words, and work of Christ what God had promised in the Scriptures, *including the Law* (cf. 1:22, 2:15-17, 23, 3:15, 4:14, 8:17, 12:17, 13:35, 21:4, 26:54-56, 27:9).
  - Jesus fulfilled the Law, not by fully expounding it, but by bringing it in its entirety to its divinely ordained terminus in relation to Himself. He fulfilled the Law first by *being* the One it spoke of – the Son, Servant, Disciple and Witness the Law defined and prescribed. And being Himself the fulfillment of the Law, Jesus testified to this fulfillment by *interpreting* the Law in relation to Himself and His kingdom. This is precisely the significance of His introductory formula, “*You have heard it said, but I say to you.*” So far from expounding and reconfirming Moses, Jesus was declaring that One greater than Moses had come – the One of whom Moses spoke and prophesied; the One in whom Moses found his own fulfillment (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-19 with John 5:36-47, Acts 3:12-26 and 7:35-40; also Luke 16:19-31, 24:13-45; John 1:17, 45; esp. Hebrews 3:1-6).
- 4) Finally, the way Jesus interacted with the particular issues He raised shows that His “fulfilling” the Law was more than merely His articulating a more accurate and thorough explanation of its demands. While some of His treatments do appear to point in that direction (i.e., 5:21-32), others cannot reasonably be interpreted in that way. Notable among them is Jesus’ instruction on retribution (ref. 5:38-42; cf. also vv. 33-37 dealing with oaths). Those who hold that Jesus’ intention was to set forth the pure Law of Moses commonly argue that, in this instance, He was prohibiting private vengeance as “going beyond what is written.” *But in reality, Jesus was establishing an entirely new principle in relation to the “eye for eye” ordinance.* For under the Mosaic code, this law demanded exacting justice and thereby forbid all mercy and deference; in sharp contrast, Jesus was calling for just such deference at the expense of the strict satisfaction of justice (cf. Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:17-22; esp. Deuteronomy 19:15-21).

Jesus prefaced His treatment of the Law in 5:21-48 by declaring that He came to fulfill it, and the issues He then went on to address serve individually and collectively to explain how that is the case. Therefore, it’s impossible that in some instances He was speaking of fulfillment in terms of *explication* and in others of *salvation-historical fulfillment* as indicated throughout Matthew’s gospel. And because a couple of Jesus’ examples can only be interpreted in the latter sense, all of them must be interpreted in the same way. What is definitive limits the meaning of what is ambiguous.

Whatever, then, the interpretive challenges associated with the details of Jesus’ interaction with these laws, *it remains that He was seeking to explain to His hearers how the ethic of God’s kingdom as set forth by the Law of Moses finds its counterpart in His kingdom in relation to the fulfillment that has come in Him.* The individual components of the Law of Moses were no different than the entire Mosaic Code (the Old Covenant) and the Israelite salvation history of which they were a part: They, too, were prophetic and promissory, pointing toward and looking to find their own christological fulfillment in the kingdom of heaven (ref. again 5:17-18).

Jesus' example cases demonstrate in succinct fashion how it is that all of the Law is fulfilled – and, more importantly, *transformed* – in Him. In so doing, they also clarify what it means that the sons of the kingdom possess a righteousness surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees. A passing glance at the Sermon on the Mount may leave the impression that this righteousness consists in a sincerity, insight, and depth of commitment that transcends the external, if not hypocritical, observance of Israel's religious leaders. But Jesus' summary declaration leaves no doubt that He was referring to something far more profound than this: The righteousness that characterizes His kingdom and its subjects is the righteousness of God Himself; *the sons of the kingdom must be perfect as God is perfect* (5:48).

This statement will be considered in more depth later, but at this point it suffices to say that it shows that Jesus was speaking of a righteousness that transcends the capability and resource of man in his estranged and corrupted condition. Indeed, those whose righteousness Jesus rebuked were preeminently “righteous” in the judgment of their fellow Israelites; for Him to insist upon a righteousness surpassing that of these holy men would have shocked His hearers and left them concluding that, if He was right, they had absolutely no hope of entering God's kingdom.

This is exactly where Jesus wanted his audience to arrive in their thinking. Operating out of a natural frame of reference, they needed to be stripped of their confidence concerning their place in the promised kingdom. For Jesus' kingdom isn't a polished or perfected version of the kingdom of Israel as they had been led to believe; *it is the reality and realm of the new creation* – a truth that should have been evident to all who had heard and discerned His words to this point.

- From the outset Jesus proclaimed that He had come to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven (4:17), and now He was insisting that, in so doing, He was fulfilling all the Scripture.
- The obvious implication is that this “kingdom of heaven” He spoke of is the kingdom prophesied by the Law and Prophets, and the Scripture everywhere associates that kingdom with Yahweh's work of comprehensive creational renewal and restoration.
- And if the kingdom of heaven is the realm of God's new creation, it then follows that all who inhabit it are *themselves* partakers in its renewal. The righteousness demanded by Jesus isn't even remotely associated with personal commitment or self-reform. But neither is it a personal outcome encouraged and nourished by divine instruction and power; it is not God helping a person to be all he can be.

In summary, *Jesus' example cases highlight the fact that the ethic of His kingdom flows out of His fulfillment of the Law, and His treatment of each individual issue shows how the Law is fulfilled in Him.* He well knew His words were going to come across as if He were setting Himself against the Law – “You have heard..., **but I say to you,**” and so He gave advance notice that His interpretation of the Law's demands didn't constitute abrogation, but fulfillment. Like the Israelite kingdom itself, its covenant Law was preparatory and prophetic, predestined to find its true meaning and enduring significance in Him. The ethic of the kingdom of heaven isn't the Mosaic Law (or moral law) purified, but *christified*. And so it is with its righteousness: The righteousness that secures entrance into Christ's kingdom is authentic, uncompromised humanness; it is the “christiformity” of man sharing in the life and likeness of the Last Adam.