

The kingdom of heaven is the realm of the new creation, and thus its ethic proceeds out of and reflects the fact and power of that renewal. It is the ethic of consummate humanness first manifested in the history of redemption in Jesus of Nazareth, and now finding fruition in the sons of the Last Adam who are being transformed into His likeness by His Spirit.

The ethic of the kingdom is simply the life of the new creation in Christ; as such, it exists outside of and is unavailable to the old Adamic order and those who continue to inhabit it. It pertains to an “otherworldly” kingdom and so cannot be fully discerned with a natural mind – whether the mind of those who are yet estranged from God or those Christians who fail to perceive and judge with the mind of Christ within them.

- So it is that countless professing believers are convinced of (and promote) the notion that living an “ethical” Christian life involves striving for personal conformity to Jesus’ instruction and the moral example He provided by His own life.
- This “what would Jesus do” vision of holiness reflects the natural wisdom of the “old man” and reinforces to the unbelieving world of men what they already hold as an innate axiom, namely that the righteousness that obtains the kingdom of heaven (however that kingdom may be conceived) is the righteousness of self-effort and self-reform – the same righteousness that defined the seemingly godly scribes and Pharisees.

And so, the ironic tragedy of the Sermon on the Mount is that multitudes who look to it as epitomizing God’s “will” for men (Christians as well as non-Christians) find in it scriptural reinforcement of the very thing Jesus was rebuking and warning against. Like every one of their unregenerate counterparts, many Christians read Jesus’ instruction through the natural human paradigm of righteousness as “law-likeness” rather than true God-likeness.

As long as Christians are in this life, the process of spiritual transformation (that is, the renewing of their minds by the Spirit) is incomplete, and that means they must consciously discipline themselves to be discerning and vigilant against the subtle and ever-present influence of “natural-mindedness.” As it pertains to the Sermon on the Mount, the vestiges of the “old man” will incline them to view Jesus’ articulation of the kingdom’s ethic as a laundry list of attitudes and behaviors to which they are to render their attention and efforts. If the “old man” has his way, the new creation will be reduced to a new commitment and the kingdom of heaven will be thrown down to the earth.

Because the kingdom of heaven is the realm of the new creation, life within this kingdom consists in a person’s renewal and transformation into Christ-likeness. This, in turn, points to the kingdom’s ethic being centered in *love* – not the human philosophical ideal or practical standard people call “love,” but love as an essential attribute of God Himself. *The implication of this is that the ethic of the kingdom of heaven becomes coherent and functional for human beings only when the life of God is present within them.* The Scripture is clear that the kingdom’s ethic is merely the life of love, but it equally insists that love does not exist among men except as they share in the life of God through the new birth (1 John 4:7). Thus Jesus’ singular commandment to His disciples (John 15:12) was His tacit affirmation of the absolute necessity of their spiritual rebirth; His command to love looked to the outpouring of the Spirit (ref. John 15:13-16:15).

As noted in the preceding section, Jesus chose to open up to His audience the ethic of His kingdom by directly comparing and contrasting it with the ethic of the Old Covenant kingdom. It was shown that the reality of the new creation distinguishes Jesus' kingdom from the previous Israelite kingdom (as also from every human kingdom), and so it is that the authentic love made possible by the new creation is the core distinction between their respective ethics.

This is not to say that the ethic of the Old Covenant kingdom had no connection with its New Covenant counterpart. The Law of Moses did clearly establish love as the marrow of Israel's ethical obligation; indeed, it could not have been otherwise given the Israelite kingdom's prototypical role (Mark 12:28-34). *But a prototype only portrays and promises; it doesn't fulfill.*

- The Law of Moses – which defined and governed the kingdom of Israel – held out the singular obligation of unqualified and uncompromised love (first for God, then for men). Love was *demande*d, but it was never *realized*. Israel's defining “lawlessness” was nothing more than its continual violation of the law of love, whether with respect to God (lawlessness as *adultery*) or their fellow man (lawlessness as *selfishness*, *hatred*, and *spiritual pride*). Thus the Old Covenant spoke of and demanded love as the ethic of God's kingdom, but it couldn't secure it. The Law of Moses and the kingdom it administered could only look with longing to their promised messianic counterparts.

- And so Jesus' “*You've heard it said, but I say to you...*” didn't constitute a wholesale break with what had come before; He didn't come to abrogate, but to fulfill. Far from disannulling or overthrowing its predecessor, the kingdom He was proclaiming stood as its fulfillment. So the ethic of His kingdom is the living realization of what the Law demanded but could not effect.

Jesus' comparison/contrast method of presentation was as necessary as it was intentional; it reflected the very nature of salvation history, expressing the *correspondence* (continuity) between the old and the new as well as their *distinction* (discontinuity). He was affirming to His hearers what they should have already known, namely that the relation between the ethics of the Mosaic kingdom and the kingdom of heaven – as indeed between the kingdoms themselves – is one of promise and fulfillment. *Most importantly, the transitional hinge between the kingdom ethic in promise and in fulfillment is the realization of the obligation of love in the new creation that has come in Christ.* Like individual facets on the same jewel, each of Jesus' example cases serves in its own way to proclaim and exalt this essential truth.

1. Enmity and the Kingdom of Heaven (5:21-26)

Inasmuch as love is the very essence of His kingdom's ethic, it is eminently appropriate that Jesus began his treatment of it by considering the issue of human enmity. And though He clearly recognized that the obligation of love has its priority in love for God, Jesus directed His hearers first to the matter of love for their fellow man. There's no way to know for certain, but it's possible He chose this approach because people's lack of love is so immediately evident in their relationships with other people. A person may be able to fool himself about his love for God, but his day-to-day experiences in this world will not permit the same sort of delusion respecting his fellow man.

- a. Jesus introduced this subject by referencing the Law’s prescription against **murder** (5:21; cf. Exodus 20:13). At the outset it is important to note that this commandment forbid the taking of innocent life, not the application of capital punishment to capital crimes. Though the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is often cited to support the notion that capital punishment is a sin, even a cursory reading of the Law of Moses shows that many covenant violations were to be punished by death (cf. Exodus 21:12-29, 31:14-15; Leviticus 20:1-16, 27; etc.).

Taking a human life *as such* did not amount to an ethical or covenantal violation; what God strictly forbid was taking the life of an innocent person. This was the crime of murder, and God testified to its seriousness by attaching to it the punishment of death. Far from always being a sin, taking a life was, in many instances – including murder, a matter of righteousness. Thus Jesus affirmed the obvious, namely that all murderers are liable to the demands of justice.

- b. Jesus was here concerned with the Law’s command against shedding innocent blood, and the reason was that the act of murder shines a light into the souls of men and illumines their true crime: Whether the result of a moment of passion or calculated premeditation, murder is always the tangible fruit of hatred; at its core, it is a transgression of the Creator’s singular law – the law of love.

This is exactly what Jesus sought to show when He declared that those whose only crime is the verbal outflow of a wrathful heart incur guilt equal to that of a murderer. To highlight His point and make sure it wasn’t missed, Jesus noted what the sons of Israel accepted about the legal liability of murder and then took a related lesser offense and attached an increasingly greater liability to it. They accepted that murder incurs liability to human justice; did they recognize that a wrathful heart and evil-speaking make a person liable to God’s judgment (5:22)?

Appreciating that justice requires that a punishment fit the crime, the natural mind wants to conclude that Jesus was simply using hyperbole for rhetorical effect. But this would be a terrible mistake: Jesus meant exactly what He said and He wasn’t perverting justice in the process. The reason people balk at His pronouncement is that they don’t understand the true nature of all human offense.

- Natural wisdom says that *doing* is a worse crime than *thinking*; this is the underlying premise of Roman Catholicism’s distinction between sin and concupiscence as the inward tendency toward sin. Concupiscence doesn’t incur personal guilt; acting upon it does.
- But Jesus would have His audience understand that murder and evil speaking incur equal guilt because they are merely different expressions of the same enmity that seeks the same goal, namely the destruction of the hated individual. Taking a life has an obvious finality, but the one who “slays” another with words is defined and driven by the same lethal hatred and so is no less culpable. Both equally violate the law of love.

Once again, it's not that the Law of Moses was blind to this truth; it clearly and consistently addressed issues of the heart. Neither was it the case that the essential nature of justice was different under the Law. *What has changed in the age of fulfillment is the nature of God's kingdom:*

- The Israelite kingdom only foreshadowed the true kingdom of God; its prophetic and preparatory role meant that it did not realize in itself that which it portrayed and promised. So the sons of the kingdom were citizens of it on the basis of *physical* considerations, not spiritual ones.
- The kingdom Jesus was proclaiming is the fulfillment of the Israelite prototype; it is in substance what its predecessor was in type and shadow (Colossians 2:16-17). So its citizens are sons of God by virtue of spiritual union with Him (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Colossians 3:1-3) by which they share in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:1-14; cf. Acts 17:26-30).

The Law of Moses served a preparatory role in salvation history, governing a physical and unregenerate covenant "kingdom." Being a prophetic instrument, it set forth the key principles and features of God's true kingdom, but it could only point to them as a matter of promise to be realized in the future. Concerning the overarching obligation of love, the Law could only address "unloving" actions; it couldn't punish the inward absence of love anymore than it could produce it.

But now, with the in-breaking of the kingdom, the promises were being fulfilled and the shadows were taking their substantive form. Jesus' very presence on the hillside in Galilee meant that men no longer have an excuse for their loveless hearts; the singular command of His gospel to turn to Him and enter into His life was the testimony that God was at last fulfilling His ancient promise to give men new hearts (Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Ezekiel 36:22-30). The day of renewal had dawned; the bondage of the Adamic nature was about to be overthrown.

- c. This frame of reference is vitally important in understanding Jesus' summary exhortation to the multitudes (5:23-26). Without it, the natural tendency once again is to reduce it to a list of actions Christians are to take when they find themselves guilty of speaking badly about another person. But Jesus wasn't prescribing a set of directives as much as He was affirming that His kingdom is characterized by *authenticity*; all of the former shadows that stretched across the landscape of salvation history have yielded to the substance. So it is with the sons of the kingdom: They are truly children of God – sons by spiritual renewal and participation in the divine nature rather than physical designation.

Thus, in the time of fulfillment, outward conformity no longer constitutes covenant faithfulness. The Law could only demand and alternatively punish or reward behavior; it couldn't reach to issues of the heart. But now with the new creation, the sons of the covenant have become what the covenant calls them to be, *and therefore they are rightly judged at the level of the inner man.*

God found fault with Israel's open hypocrisy in their worship of Him and judged them for it (cf. Isaiah 1:10-17, 29:13; Amos 5:21-27; etc.). At the same time, the unregenerate state of His national covenant "son" left Him no choice but to accept sacrifices offered out of fundamentally estranged hearts. Even at the time that the *nation* stood covenantally blameless and its elders were able to fearlessly ascend Sinai into Yahweh's presence (Exodus 24:1ff), the *individual* children of Israel – as all of Adam's fallen race – remained alienated from Him (cf. Ezekiel 20:1-28; Hosea 11:1-3). The sons of Israel could manifest a degree of sincerity, but always within the confines of the curse. The time of renewal had not yet come, and so what God required of them was that they reform their ways and legitimize their worship of Him by combining it with *deeds* of justice, mercy and righteousness.

Now, in the era of the new creation, there is no such excuse; *the righteousness of sincerity has become the righteousness of authenticity* – the righteousness that is Christ-likeness (5:23-24). What this means is that the sons of the kingdom are to live in the illumination and discernment of Christ's mind (1 Corinthians 2:12-16). They are to take all thoughts captive to Him (2 Corinthians 10:3-5) and approach all of life's demands, activities and circumstances as being His worship and service (Colossians 3:16-24; cf. Philippians 1:219-21). In the kingdom of heaven there is no secular and sacred; all is "holy to the Lord" (Zechariah 14:20-21).

And so Jesus declared that, in His kingdom, the worship of God cannot be separated from one's relationship with men (5:23); both reflect the same obligation of love that is the authentic fulfillment of righteousness (cf. Matthew 22:35-40 with Romans 13:8-10). It is a profound error and grievous offense to act as if (let alone actually believe) God can be adored in worship while men created in His image and likeness are hated and vilified (James 3:7-12). *Moreover, the offense of hatred exists even if no one else is aware of it:* In Jesus scenario, the offender is the one who is aware that his brother has something against him, and his culpability doesn't depend upon the other person knowing of the offense.

The kingdom of heaven has brought deliverance and freedom to Adam's race, but also a new obligation. In the time of promise and preparation God did not defer from all judgment, but human culpability was not what it is in the present era of fulfillment (Acts 13:14-17). This heightened culpability pertains to Israel as much as to the nations (note John 15:18-25 in which *Israel's* hatred of Christ and sin of unbelief are synonymous with those of the *world*). Now that Christ has come, all men – Jew and Gentile – have the new and determinative obligation to repent and believe in Him (Acts 17:22-31; cf. also Matthew 25:31-46 with John 3:16-19). ***There is thus a severity to the kingdom*** (5:25-26): Those who have entered it as well as those who refuse it must understand that God is not mocked; *all will be judged according to what they have done with Christ*. Have they refused Him? They stand condemned in their unbelief and will not escape their due penalty at His judgment seat. Have they embraced Him? They must not forget that they are accountable to their lives in Him; they will be tried in the fire and will receive the recompense of their "deeds in the body" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10).