

**“But I Say to You...”**

“You have heard that it was said...” Six times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus used this phrase. And when He made this statement, the people in His audience knew exactly what He was talking about. “You have heard that it was said...” was a direct reference to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. You see, in Jesus’ day, these highly respected, religious men served as the interpreters and enforcers of the Law, and in this role they were exceptional! The scribes and Pharisees were consummate rule keepers and models of morality. Not only did they possess a meticulous knowledge of God’s Law, but they had also perfected the art of manipulating it. They had dissected the Law into a manageable code of conduct, and as challenging as it may have been, these men had transformed the holy Law of God into a doable formula for righteousness; one that could be measured and, ultimately, mastered. And this is the mindset Jesus was referring to when He introduced His teaching with the words: “You have heard that it was said...”

But simply referring to this self-righteous understanding of the Law wasn’t good enough, and so in each of the six statements from Jesus that begin with the phrase, “You have heard that it was said...” Jesus goes farther! And He does it with these words: “*But I say to you...*” “But I say to you.” In these five simple words, Jesus “upped the ante” and instead promoting a legalistic and outward fulfillment of the letter of Law, Jesus completely redefined what the Law of God really meant. And just as the refrain from today’s Leviticus reading “I am the Lord” reminded the people of the divine author behind the Law, the words “But I say to you” redefined the Law of God with impossible demands that not even the scribes and Pharisees could meet.

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment... and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell’s fire” (Matthew 5:21). And again Jesus said, “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” (Matthew 5:27).

Verse after verse, command after command, Jesus turned up the heat of the Law to an unbearable and impossible level, and in doing this He completely vilified the false pretense of the scribes and Pharisees who focused all of their attention on external appearance. You see, Jesus wanted the people to understand that the demands of God’s Law go much deeper than outward behavior. The Law was designed for the heart and when Jesus said, “But I say to you...” He was making it crystal clear that the superficial and legalistic understanding of the Law held by the scribes and Pharisees wasn’t enough... and this is a lesson we still need to learn because our nature hasn’t changed one bit. Just like the scribes and Pharisees of the ancient world, we downplay the true demands of God’s Law, and instead of taking God’s Word seriously we compare ourselves to those around us, pointing out the repugnant behavior of others so that we can feel a little better about our own reprehensible sins. And this damning, relative righteousness is exactly what Jesus attacks in today’s reading.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” And as we hear these words from God, our self-righteous and sinful nature anticipates the assault that’s coming next and we frantically object to the preposterous and impossible demands Jesus sets. I mean, after all, these are common sense statements! These are rules for living that everyone knows are true. The punishment should fit the crime! We should take care of those who take care of us and we should go after those who wish us harm! How could Jesus possibly challenge these basic principles of self-preservation? But that’s exactly what He does!

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

from you” (Matthew 5:38-42). And Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

In every reasonable way, these words of Christ are ridiculous! And there is not one of us here who naturally does these things, who rewards selfishness, who willingly submits to abuse, who repays cruelty with kindness. There is no question about it, these commands are impossible for us!!! And it’s only when we admit this that we begin to understand what Jesus is doing. You see, in these words Jesus shows us that *this* is what God is like! “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.”

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began this litany of demands by telling His disciples, “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. 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.” In these words, Jesus destroys our petty understanding of righteousness, and He reinterprets the Law as an unreachable standard, and He does this so that we will stop relying on ourselves and see Jesus for the Savior He is!

This is exactly what Paul meant when he wrote, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...” (Romans 5:6). And this is what Isaiah was doing when he said about Jesus: “Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5).

As Jesus sat on the mountainside teaching His disciples the unbending and impossible Law of God, He was describing the very work He came to accomplish. You see, the Sermon on the Mount and, in fact, the entire Biblical record all point to Christ! It is here in the Word that we find out who God is and how He feels about us. It is here we are told that, in Christ, God has loved us even though we have rejected Him. It is here we are told that in Christ, God has forgiven us, even though our sins pinned Him to the Cross. It is here we are told that in Christ, God has given us life even though we justly deserve death. And because of this word of truth, we have also been given a new understanding of who we are in Christ, and this is a word of God that we desperately need because today every one of us hears an accusing voice; a voice that tells us that we haven’t loved our enemy, or given our cloak to the one who sued us, or gone the extra mile or turned the other cheek...and we haven’t.

But in the face of our sin, *Jesus still speaks!* And today He says: “*But I say to you...* Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). My friends, Jesus still speaks, and when you hear it said that there’s no way God can forgive the horrible and deplorable sins you have committed...the voice of the Savior promises: “*But I say to you:* I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). And when you hear the voice of the accuser who says that there’s no way you’re good enough to go to heaven...the voice of your Savior cries out: “*But I say to you...* I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”

“*But I say to you.*” My friends, this is the point of the Bible and it is the heart of the Christian faith, because, you see, what Jesus says matters most. It matters more than our hearts, it matters more than our words, it matters more than what we know, or what we’ve accomplished, or how we’ve sinned! And today these are Jesus’ words: “*But I say to you...* you are holy” and, because of the work and words of Jesus...today, you are! Go with the peace of the promise of God’s words to you today. Amen.

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