

THE TRUE INTERPRETATION OF THE LAW

- A. Introduction: Acts 1:9-11—When Jesus returned to Heaven His first message to His followers was: I’ll be back. He’s coming again to complete God’s plan to have a family that He can live with forever. Eph 1:4-5
1. Jesus came to earth 2,000 years ago to die as a sacrifice for sin so that all who put faith in Him can be transformed from sinners into holy, righteous sons and daughters of God. He’ll come again to cleanse the earth of all corruption and death and restore it to a fit forever home for Himself and His family. Rom 8:29-30; Rev 21-22 (lessons for another day)
 - a. Jesus warned that the years prior to His return will be marked by religious deception (false christs and false prophets), as the devil works to hold onto this world. Matt 24:4-5; 24:11; 23:23-24
 1. Satan will offer the world his counterfeit of the rightful King—a man commonly known as Antichrist. He will try to draw the entire world to worship him. Rev 13:1-18; II Thess 2:3-4
 2. The world is currently moving in the direction of a universal brand of religion that will welcome this final world ruler. And, the Bible warns that at the end, there will be a falling away from true Christianity. I Tim 4:1; II Thess 2:9-10
 - b. So, we are taking time to look at Jesus as He is revealed in the Bible—who He is, why He came, and what message He preached. Our goal is to become so familiar with the genuine Jesus (Jesus of the Bible) that we are not deceived by false christs, false prophets, or false gospels.
 2. Christians are vulnerable to deception because this developing universal brand of religion uses some “Christian” language. On the surface, it can sound right, but its core doctrines are contrary to the Bible.
 - a. A social gospel is developing. Using out of context Bible verses, it proclaims that true Christianity is about making this world a better place by helping the poor and the downtrodden. According to this gospel, it doesn’t matter what you believe or how you live as long as you’re sincere.
 - b. But according to the true gospel of Jesus Christ (a supernatural gospel), you must acknowledge Him as Savior and Lord. When you do so, the Spirit of God transforms you inwardly. You become a son or daughter of God through a new or second birth, and begin to live in a way that is glorifying to God, your Father. John 1:12-13; I John 5:1; etc.
 3. In order to rightly interpret a Bible verse, we must consider it in context. This means we must consider who wrote it, who they wrote to, and why they wrote. A passage can’t mean something to us that it would not have meant to the original writers and speakers, readers and hearers.
 - a. With that thought in mind we have been looking at the historical context into which Jesus was born to give us a framework through which to assess what we hear.
 - b. Last week we began to look at the Sermon on the Mount. It is one of the best known passages of Scripture, but it is also the source of misquoted and misinterpreted verses frequently cited by those who follow a social gospel. We continue with the Sermon on the Mount in tonight’s lesson.
- B. Jesus’ earth ministry was a time of transition as He prepared 1st century Jews (Old Covenant men) to receive a New Covenant, a new relationship between God and man—that of Father and son.
1. Based on the writings of the Old Testament prophets, 1st century men and women were expecting the prophesied Messiah to establish the visible, physical kingdom of God on earth. They also knew from the prophets that only the righteous can enter God’s kingdom. Dan 2:44; Dan 7:27; Ps 24:3-4; Ps 15:1-5
 - a. The prophets were not shown clearly that there would be two separate comings of the Messiah separated by 2,000 years (Isa 9:6-7). Nor did they see clearly that the kingdom will take two forms, and that the visible kingdom would be preceded by the kingdom or reign of God in the hearts of men through new birth (Luke 17:20-21). So, Jesus had to broaden their understanding of the kingdom.
 - b. Jesus’ audiences also had a skewed concept of righteousness that came from their religious leaders.
 1. While the Jews were in captivity in Babylon (400 years before Jesus was born), they lost their

Hebrew language. It was replaced by Aramaic, a language picked up in Babylon.

- A. Consequently, since the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the people had to rely on their educated religious leaders to interpret the Scriptures—the Pharisees (strict observers of the Law of Moses) and the scribes (professional scholars and experts in the Law).
 - B. These leaders had amassed oral traditions (discussions, decisions, interpretations and sayings) given by early rabbis and scribes on the first five books of the Bible (the Torah).
 - C. These traditions were passed down orally for generations until they were written in the Mishnah, a commentary on the Torah and the Gemara, additional comments on the Mishnah. By the 1st century these works were considered to be on a par with Scripture.
2. Over His three year earth ministry, Jesus made it clear that the scribes and Pharisees preached and practiced a false righteousness and that, to enter the kingdom, His audience's righteousness had to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Matt 5:20
2. The bulk of the Sermon on the Mount was directed at exposing the false righteousness preached and practiced by the Pharisees and scribes as Jesus broadened His audience's understanding of the kingdom and prepared them to receive the inward righteousness He would provide through the Cross.
 - a. Matt 5:3-12—Jesus opened His sermon with a description of the kind of people who will enter the kingdom. These verses are often referred to as the beatitudes. Beatitude comes from a Latin word (beatify) that means blessed or happy. The Greek word blessed means happy, fortunate, well off.
 1. All the beatitudes refer to spiritual conditions and attitudes. Jesus was describing people who who recognize their sin, are sorrowful over it, and are ready to submit to God.
 2. They will receive righteousness. And, as they grow, they will learn to show mercy to others, live holy lives in fellowship with God, and spread the gospel of peace between God and man.
 - b. Jesus was not delivering a sermon for Christians. (There are no Christians yet.) He wasn't teaching on the new birth or how to be saved. He was talking to Old Covenant Jews and gradually preparing them for the big changes to come through His death and resurrection.
 3. Matt 5:17-20—Throughout His ministry Jesus contradicted the traditions of the religious leaders by eating with sinners and healing on the Sabbath. And they continually called into question His behavior, accusing Him of violating the Law.
 - a. In this sermon, Jesus made it clear that He came to fulfill the Law (moral, judicial, ceremonial) and the prophets (prophetic books). Fulfill means carry out in the sense of fully obeying it.
 1. Jesus fulfilled all prophecies concerning His birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection, along with the types and shadows. He obeyed and fulfilled the Law down to the last detail. The Law decreed punishment for sin (death) and He was punished (died in our place) for our sin.
 2. Jot is the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet. Tittle refers to the little lines between Hebrew letters that distinguished them from each other and was used figuratively for minute trifles.
 - b. Once Jesus assured the audience of His commitment to the Law, Jesus made His shocking statement about the righteousness needed to enter the kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees looked holy and virtuous—above what the average person could do.
 1. However, theirs was an external righteousness, not a religion of the heart (Matt 23:23-28). They were more concerned with details than principles and actions rather than motives.
 2. The Pharisees had established rules and regulations, but missed the whole point of the Law. Jesus will spend most of the rest of the sermon exposing their righteousness.
- C. Matt 5:21-48—Jesus used six examples from the Law to expose their false interpretations and present the true meaning (spirit) of the Law: Ye have heard it said (refers to the Pharisees' misinterpretation), but I say unto you (refers to the true interpretation). v21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43
 1. Jesus was not giving a list of rules but rather illustrations of principles in the Law. The examples that

He gave are actually secondary to the principles He was illustrating.

- a. Jesus wasn't teaching on murder, adultery, divorce, taking oaths, retaliation, and loving your fellowman, per se. He was illustrating the spirit behind the Law to expose their misinterpretation. The Pharisees kept the letter of the Law but missed the spirit behind it.
- b. We find some of the strangest and most misunderstood statements made by Jesus in this section.
2. Matt 5:21-26—The Pharisees taught that if you did not commit the physical act of murder (kill in the Greek) you had fulfilled the Law. They had added to the sixth of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:13) the idea that whoever murders shall be in danger of the judgment.
 - a. Judgment meant punishment at the hands of the local court, a council of twenty-three men. They judged cases of murder and could inflict a punishment of strangling or beheading.
 - b. The Pharisees had reduced murder to a legal matter, making no mention of the fact that it is an offense against God (Gen 9:6). They missed the spirit behind the Law.
 - c. According to Jesus, causeless anger is murder in the heart. Anger and ill will toward a brother deserves the same punishment or judgment as killing the man. Jesus put verbal attacks that reveal contempt in the heart on a more serious level than the act of murder since murder begins in the heart.
 1. Raca means worthless fellow before God. It was a statement of great contempt or despising. The council refers to the Sanhedrin which could inflict the punishment of stoning.
 2. Fool was an even more insulting term. It meant rebel against God and had the idea of hatred and ill will. Raca scorns a man's mind. Fool scorns his heart and character.
 - A. Hell fire is *gehenna* in the Greek, and it refers to a valley near Jerusalem where the Jews once burned their babies to the god Molech. Bodies were thrown there and burned. Any man found guilty of rebellion against God was burned alive in this valley.
 - B. With His statements, Jesus was not teaching that if you call someone a fool you'll go to Hell. He was illustrating the seriousness of ill will in your heart toward another.
 - d. v23-24—The commandment also includes taking steps to make it right with your brother. The Pharisees made ceremonial sacrifices to cover up moral failure instead of seeking to be reconciled.
 - e. v25-26—Jesus emphasized the importance of making peace. Get it settled before you go to court. Adversary is an accuser or plaintiff in law. The judge means a civil magistrate.
3. Matt 5:27-32—The Pharisees reduced the commandment “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Ex 20:14) to the mere physical act. But the Law said: “Don't covet your neighbor's wife” (Ex 20:17).
 - a. Jesus said that coveting a woman or lusting after her is adultery in the heart. Adultery also comes from the heart. Jesus stressed the importance of dealing with all sin—outward and inward. At that time people believed that the right hand and eye were more important than the left. So, Jesus told His listeners, no matter how valuable something is to you, if it causes you to sin, get rid of it.
 - b. Immediately after, and in connection with Jesus comments on lust, He dealt with the Pharisees' misinterpretations of the Law of Moses concerning divorce. Deut 24:1-4
 1. The Law did not institute divorce, the Law regulated divorce. The Law was designed to protect the woman, make divorce something formal, and emphasize the seriousness of it. That is why the husband who divorced his wife could not remarry her.
 2. The Law limited divorce to certain cases. A man had to establish a cause for divorce under the title of uncleanness (indecent or improper behavior) proved in the sight of two witnesses. The Law didn't mention divorce for adultery because under the Law the penalty was stoning.
 - c. The Pharisees taught that the Law commanded and urged men to divorce under certain conditions.
 1. If a man disliked his wife for any reason (how she prepared food) it was uncleanness and he could divorce her. Rabbi Akiba said, “If a man saw a woman handsomer than his own wife, he might put his wife away because the Law said ‘if she find not favor in his eyes’”. The Jewish historian Josephus divorced his wife being “not being pleased with her manners”.

2. Note Jesus discussed divorce right after He talked about lust. Married men would lust after another woman and divorce their wives to have the woman they lusted for. According to the Pharisees, they had the full permission of the Law if their wife gave her a bill of divorcement.
 3. Jesus wasn't giving rules for divorce. He was dealing with the Pharisees' misinterpretation that it was lawful to divorce for any reason. The spirit behind the Law is one wife for life.
 4. Matt 5:33-37—First century Jews swore by all sorts of things (their head and hair, the Temple, Heaven).
 - a. The Pharisees reduced oath taking to, don't commit perjury (for swear), and said certain oaths were binding and others were not. One could swear with his lips and cancel it immediately in his heart.
 - b. Jesus did not say that you can't take an oath in court. He exposed the Pharisees' misinterpretation by presenting the spirit behind the Law: Just speak the truth and keep the oaths you make.
 5. Matt 5:38-42—The Law did say an eye for an eye (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20), but it was given to the judges who were responsible for keeping law and order. It meant that the punishment must fit the crime.
 - a. The Pharisees used the law for personal issues and made it a justification for private revenge. Jesus gave the true interpretation or spirit behind the letter. Turn the other cheek means get rid of the spirit of retaliation, the desire to get revenge. Do not repel one outrage with for another (Clarke).
 - b. In v40-42, using familiar examples, Jesus illustrated the intent of the Law. Give up the tendency to repay personal insults, insist on your own rights, and hold on to your own.
 1. According to Jewish law a man could not be sued for his outer coat, but he could for an inner coat. Jesus said if a man wants one, give him both. It's the spirit behind it.
 2. In the ancient world, especially in conquered countries, the government had the right to commandeer a man to carry baggage for up to a mile. Jesus said, "Give him two!"
 3. If someone asks you for something, give it to him. This isn't a rule. It's an illustration of a principle which Jesus will eventually elaborate on. Sons of God are not self-focused.
 6. Matt 5:43-48—The Law did not say hate your enemy, it said love your neighbor (Lev 19:18). Pharisees taught that it was a right, almost a duty, to hate non-Jews, and thought they honored God by doing so.
 - a. Jesus told them to love their enemies—bless them, do good to them, pray for them. Your treatment of people should reflect your Father in Heaven. He gives rain and sun to the good and the evil.
 1. Anyone can love people who love them and are kind to them. The publicans do as much. The publicans were Jews who collected taxes for the Roman government and were despised for it.
 2. Your Father in Heaven does not deal with people based on who they are, what they deserve, or what they have done to Him. Neither should you.
 - b. In addition to broadening His audience's understanding of the kingdom and of the righteousness needed to enter the kingdom, Jesus was also introducing to them the concept of God as their Father. Remember, that's why He went to the Cross—to make it possible for sinners to become sons.
- D. Conclusion: We've covered one third of the Sermon on the Mount, emphasizing the context. We have much more to say about it next week. But consider these thoughts as we close this lesson.
1. It may seem as though this lesson is off point from our topic of equipping ourselves to recognize false christs and counterfeit gospels. But it isn't, since part of rightly interpreting the Scriptures comes from understanding the historical and cultural context of the time in which they were written.
 2. To rightly interpret any verse we must consider who is talking or writing, who they are talking or writing to, and what they are writing about. As we've already pointed out, counterfeit gospels use verses taken out of context. The more we learn about the history and the culture, the more accurate our frame of reference we will be as we determine whether or not verses are used in context.
 3. You can get to the point where, even though you may not be able to specifically refute what someone teaches, you will be able to accurately determine: That teaching does not seem to fit with the historical and cultural context of the New Testament world and the first Christians. Lots more next week!