

PLAYING BY THE RULES

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

Danny Hall

Recently a golden retriever named Bella got a lot of coverage in *The Mercury News*. Bella had gotten loose a couple of weeks earlier without her collar on, and she was picked up by the Humane Society. The frantic owner and friends were scouring the neighborhoods, and supposedly even dropped by the Humane Society on several occasions, but never saw Bella. The Humane Society has a rule that if a dog is not identifiable by a tag or some other means and no one comes to claim it after five days, then it is put up for adoption. So after five days the Humane Society put Bella up for adoption. Along came a family who were looking for a dog for their ten-year-old daughter. They were delighted with Bella and adopted her, but didn't take her home right away. Five hours later on that same day, a friend of the original owner came in, and there was Bella! The original owner identified and claimed her, but the Humane Society said, "Sorry--this dog now legally belongs to the new family."

This got into the news, and for two days the adoptive family was vilified in the press. It is amazing how big the story got. But they weren't even in town; they had gone on vacation. When they got back and found out about all this, they returned Bella to her original owner.

People kept asking the Humane Society, "Once you knew whom the dog belonged to, even though the papers had been signed and the money had been paid, the dog was still on your premises, so why didn't you just correct that?" It was just common sense. But the Humane Society personnel kept falling back on one thing: "It is the law. There was nothing we could do." Of course they too got vilified for hiding behind the letter of the law.

How many times do we get caught in situations where following the letter of the law flies in the face of common sense and boxes us into outcomes that we never anticipated or wanted? The search for right and wrong leads us down many crazy paths. We all have to figure out day by day how to live morally and rightly in our world. The question of how to live morally has been central to the human experience for all time. Sometimes we find protection and security in following laws and rules to the nth degree. But sometimes when we are bound by that we run up against what is moral. One columnist, while wrongly vilifying Bella's adoptive family, did make an interesting comment: "There is a difference between what is legal and what is right."

The Jews in Jesus' day were characterized by a very strong emphasis on following their code of right and wrong, and they had one extra thing going for them: their Law came from God. Now we know there is nothing wrong with following God's Law; in fact, we are going to see how right that is as a starting place. But obedience to the Law had grown in complexity over the years as the details of compliance were refined and expanded. More and more rules had been loaded onto this idea of living out God's Law. The system required sophisticated interpretations and explanations of minutiae, and those whose jobs depended on preserving it put a great deal of energy into it. So there was a growing sense in that culture that following the letter of the Law through all of these interpretations was what it took to be a good follower of God, a good Jew.

When Jesus stepped into this milieu, he began to radically redefine what it meant to be righteous. He took on a culture that was lost in the minutiae of the letter of the Law and set his followers on a whole new path. Jesus taught on this theme over and over again throughout his ministry. The earliest recorded teaching on this point, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, is the subject of our series. This

sermon is filled with wonderful new insight into what it means to be righteous, to be part of the kingdom of God, in contrast to some of the assumptions that people of Jesus' day had made. Jesus has highly specific comments about this issue of the Law and righteousness in Matthew 5:17-20, a crucial passage, if not the most key passage, in understanding the whole sermon.

Before we read it, let's review where we have been. Jesus began this sermon with a description of the character and life of a kingdom person, the kind of person who receives God's blessing and reward, in a series of statements that we call the Beatitudes. True kingdom people begin from a position of total vulnerability before God, understanding that in and of themselves they have nothing to offer him. "Blessed are the poor"--those who fall completely on God's mercy and grace. He goes on to say that those who live this way will eventually challenge the status quo of society. If you choose to follow God, to place your loyalty with him, it will engender opposition, which is sometimes very hostile. Often that opposition comes from members of the religious community itself, people who have calcified into hard categories of obedience and lost their heart for God. But when you respond to God with a heart of warmth, loyalty, and love, and seek to honor him in your life, you will be blessed even when you get that kind of opposition, because God is going to walk through it with you, and your future blessings and security are assured in him.

So when you live under God's grace and guidance, you begin to demonstrate to the world a new way of living that is not based on self but on loyalty to and love for Christ and honoring him, which leads you to be a person who can care for others. Your life is changed and people begin to see God living in you; because of your good works, their attention is turned toward God. This is one of the ways that God expands his kingdom; he shows the rest of the world his heart through his people.

But all this redefining Jesus has done raises the question: "What about the Law and all that we have heard in God's word? What about the history of our nation? Have you come to set all that aside?" So Jesus pauses to give us some important truth about the Law in Matthew 5:17-20:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus draws our attention to two important relationships: his own relationship to the Law, and the relationship of his followers to the Law. These truths prepare us for the practical application in specific life situations that he is about to give.

Let's look at Jesus' relationship to the Law.

The Law points to Jesus

He tells us three things in verses 17-18: the purpose and nature of the Law, the extent to which the Law is still in play, and the duration of the Law.

Concerning the purpose and nature of the Law, Jesus says, "It is not my mission to abolish the Law, or to set it aside." Some will accuse him of that. Even in the history of the church it has been thought that

at least in some way, Jesus has replaced the Old-Testament Law. But Jesus says, “Rather, I came to fulfill it.”

What does it mean that Jesus fulfills the Law? Some people have argued that what Jesus means is that he is going to live out the Law perfectly, because in so doing, he will ultimately become the sinless sacrifice for our sins. It is true that Jesus did live a perfect life and that he was the sinless sacrifice for us. But that is not what he means here by “fulfill.” In Scripture the idea of fulfillment is better understood as a sense of filling up, or being the fulfillment of. Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets--that is, all of God’s revelation in the Old Testament--in the sense that it was to him that all of that Old Testament was pointing: all the demands of righteousness, the whole sacrificial system and the ceremonies surrounding it, all of the prophecies about the unfolding of God’s work in history. Jesus is saying, “All of this had one purpose: it pointed to me. And here I stand before you today.” No wonder it says they were astonished at the end of this sermon (7:28)!

I’ve been reading a wonderful little book entitled *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* by Jacob Neusner. He interacts with the teaching and life of Jesus from his perspective as a Jewish rabbi, searching for the areas of common ground in understanding Jesus’ teaching and its implications. In the end he walks away from Jesus as Messiah, but his journey is quite revealing. In some ways he understands what Jesus is saying better than a lot of us do. In reflecting on this passage he writes:

“Now in his story, Matthew himself points to this contrast, ‘for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.’ Moses alone had authority. The scribes teach the message and meaning of what Moses had set down as the Torah on the authority of God. So we find ourselves right where we started: with the difficulty of making sense, within the framework of the Torah, of a teacher who stands apart from, perhaps above, the Torah. At many points in this protracted account of Jesus’ specific teachings, we now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all.” (1)

This Jewish rabbi understands the implications of Jesus’ words. The issue here is not so much what he is teaching; it is the person of Jesus himself.

Jesus tells the crowd before him, “All that the Old Testament was talking about points to me, and it is fulfilled in me,” and that becomes the grid through which we interpret the rest of this paragraph and ultimately the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, lest anyone think there are some limitations to this, Jesus makes absolutely sure that they understand what he is talking about, so he addresses not only the purpose and nature of the Law but the extent of the Law. How much of the Old Testament does he fulfill? He says, “Not even the smallest letter or stroke will pass away”--that is, every bit of it. Some people want to separate out the moral law from the ceremonial law, because the latter is no longer in play. What Jesus is saying is not that we should still keep all the ceremonies, but that all of it pointed to him. We need not set aside any portion of the Old Testament. As it foreshadows and predicts and points to Jesus who has come to fulfill it all, it remains a rich source of teaching about him and what it means to be his follower.

Then Jesus speaks to the duration of the Law: how long will this be true? “Until heaven and earth pass away,” and he adds, “Until all is accomplished.” I think here he means that all that the Old Testament laid out in prophecy, the entire scope of what God has said he is going to do for us in salvation history, will all point to him until the end of time.

Now Jesus addresses how his followers are to handle the Law.

Heart obedience

In verses 19-20 he says two things. First, his followers are to obey the Law and teach it. “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” This seems to imply that within the kingdom of heaven his followers are not always adhering to this to the same degree. We see this in our own lives. There are periods when we are absolutely devoted to following Christ, and periods when we are not. I think Jesus anticipates that we will follow him less than perfectly, but he wants to rivet our attention to the importance of obedience. Who is great in the kingdom of heaven? Whoever keeps and teaches the commandments.

Now, what commandments is he referring to? Throughout the rest of the sermon, Jesus sets himself up as the only interpreter of what it means to obey the Old-Testament Law. In the verses that follow he will say things like “You have heard it said that this is what you should do, but I say . . .” He will take us to an understanding of obedience that goes beyond surface conformity. So as he interprets the meaning of how to live out the Old-Testament Law for us, it is his commandments, the way of Christ, that we are to follow. For while we are dependent upon his grace for our salvation, it is absolutely true that following Jesus has an effect on the way we live.

Second, to intensify the idea of obeying the commandments, he says his followers are to pursue righteousness with all their being. Now, this righteousness that he describes in verse 20 is one of those verses that really disturb us. “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” On the first reading, there is only one possible reaction: despair. “How can I ever do this?” So some have interpreted this verse to simply mean that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us because we are forgiven in him, so we now have the righteousness of Christ in our standing before God. Through faith in Christ we have put on his righteousness, and that is how our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. It is taught in the New Testament that we put on Christ’s righteousness, but I don’t think that’s what Jesus is talking about here, because he is going to immediately connect all of this to actual behaviors in life.

So how does our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? As I have mentioned earlier, over the years until the time of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees had come to so codify endless, minute ways of externally living out the Law that everything began to be focused on conformity to these external patterns of religious life. What Jesus is saying is, “I am calling you to a level of righteousness that far exceeds conformity to an external religious code; it far exceeds any external behavior. True righteousness begins in the heart.” He is going to illustrate this for us in the verses ahead. It is the nature of kingdom people to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), and God has promised that as we come to faith, the work that he began in us will be completed (Philippians 1:6). All through the New Testament there is encouragement to greater growth, and the outworking of that growth in Christ is that we live differently.

So as we live as lights in the world and as the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16), it is because the very character of Christ is shining forth ever more from us as we are transformed by him. Christ calls us to this deeper level of righteousness in which the motivation of our heart is to honor our Lord and King, the fulfillment of all that the Scriptures have been pointing to, the Savior. Our loyalty is to him. We want to live lives that are worthy of him in all that we say and do. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

There are four points for us to consider, in summary.

A life that honors Christ

First, kingdom people are completely loyal to Jesus the King. If he is not the focus of our attention as our Lord and Savior, if we are not absolutely committed to him and submissive to his lordship in our lives, none of this makes sense. That is the beginning point.

Second, kingdom people desire to honor their King in all that they say and do. They allow him to touch every single area of their life. The wonderful old Welsh preacher Stephen Olford used to say, "If Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all." We cannot say, "Jesus, I want you to be Lord of my religious life." Kingdom people surrender everything to Jesus.

Third, kingdom people recognize their utter dependence on their King. Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." To totally submit ourselves to his lordship and to live out this life that he has called us to live is not a burdensome thing. He does not call us to that which he does not empower us to do. Part of his grace in our lives is not merely forgiving our sins but enabling us to grow in our faith and to live to honor him.

Fourth, as kingdom people focus on their King, they recognize that they are being transformed into his image. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, in a passage from which we derive a lot of teaching about what we call the New Covenant, which says we rely on God's resources to be all that he is making us to be, Paul writes, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

As I have thought back over this teaching, I am reminded of my own spiritual journey. I grew up going to church all the time. I lived in a Bible-belt culture where that was what people did. I probably went to church four to six times a week. I grew up knowing what was expected of me, and I learned how to conform to that. I knew how to dress, how to act, how to go through the motions.

When I got into my teenage years, I was quite far from the Lord. Intellectually I didn't believe the teaching of the church anymore, and it certainly had no impact on the way I lived. Yet throughout that time, I went to church every Sunday. I went to all the youth activities. I took my first mission trip to South America when I was in that state. I developed a religious life that was based on outward conformity. There was a sense of propriety, at least within the context of church, that bought one a certain amount of comfort, and I fell right into that.

The summer before I entered college, Christ reached down into my life through some other teenagers and college students, showed himself to me in all his glory, and humbled me before him; and I gave my life to him. It wasn't until that point that the deepest motivations of my heart really changed. Now I wanted to honor him. I wanted him to be the one who was in charge of my life.

I wish I could say that across the thirty-plus years since then, every day I've said, "Lord, I want to honor you with all my life." But like you, I've had moments in my life when I strayed from that pure devotion to Christ. Do you know what happens in those times? I fall right back into my skill of managing the external. I still know how to look okay with other Christians. I know how to protect myself from scrutiny. I have learned to present a picture of myself to others. If we are honest, most of us know exactly what that feels like because we have done it.

Perhaps you are in one of those times. Your life is not truly submitted to the lordship of Christ, yet you

manage to appear as if things are okay spiritually. Perhaps that external image is there not so much to mask rebellion in your heart as to mask the pain. But even when it is hurt that draws us away and somehow cripples our life, it is so easy to become masters of the external. It is part of the human condition to do that. So we fall into the very patterns that Jesus was confronting in his own day, conformity to a certain set of external expectations that somehow gives us, at least for the moment, a sense of identity and comfort.

But Jesus just blows us out of the water and says, “None of that matters. I am what matters. I am the Lord to whom you must submit.” Jesus’ profound words sound severe and shocking to us sometimes. But we must see Christ in all his glory and recognize what he offers us: forgiveness and transformation and eternal fellowship with him. He opens the way for us to glorify him as our Lord and Savior as he transforms us into the kingdom people he wants us to be. Living to honor him is the mark of true kingdom people.

Notes

1) Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, © 1993, Doubleday, New York. P. 31.

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