

The Bible According to Jesus part 3

We've been looking at the way Jesus interpreted and applied Scripture. Today we continue with the "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." portions of the Gospel of Matthew. Let's see if we can observe Jesus interpretive method and applications.

Matt 5:33 (NIV)³³ *"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'*

This is not an exact quote, but the expression of men on the meaning of a passage like:

Num 30:2 (NIV)² *When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.*

It seems to be a simple, straightforward passage. Keep your word – especially to God. To understand the reasons Jesus brought this up we need a little insight into the culture of that day. Legal interpreters of the Law had come up with complicated oaths in which the validity of the pledge could be argued depending on what they swore upon. They considered some oaths more binding than others depending upon what you swore by. If it was the altar, it carried more weight than the temple gate, etc. Jesus cuts through all the game playing and legal wrangling and says,

Matt 5:34-37 (NIV)³⁴ *But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

Just say what you mean because if you start playing with words and their meanings to get out of your oath, you are led by the evil one. Isn't that the real Spirit behind the letter? Keep your word. The people had the wrong emphasis. They emphasized what the oath was sworn upon instead of the focus of keeping your word. We need the Spirit of God to help us get at the real Spirit of what is being said.

Let's try this interpretive method to a command we might have the same trouble with today. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians that some of their worship services were too disorderly. He said, "God is not the author of confusion but of peace as in all the churches of the saints." (1Cor 14:33) We can turn that expression into a rigid bulletin with no room for the moving of the Spirit, or freedom to let God author the peaceful order of the service. Instead we could focus on structure. We would be missing a chief ingredient of the previous chapters, everyone has gifts to share. Just be courteous and orderly in the way that you share them. God doesn't author chaos.

Matt 5:38-42 (NIV) ³⁸ *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'³⁹ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you*

on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Jesus may have been referring to the passage in Lev 24:19-20 (NIV)
¹⁹ *If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him:*
²⁰ *fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured.*

The Law required equitable retribution. Now that the Kingdom of God was coming we will need to give up our rights to win others. The Law allowed for justice, but a new creation in Christ is not worried about receiving but giving to win another to the Kingdom. This is much more demanding than the Law and can only be done out of the new heart that God has given to the repentant soul that trusts in Christ.

This application of the Law is impossible for man who is not a new creature. Try as he may, he will not be able to do it consistently. It is one of the biggest needs in the church today, giving up my rights for the salvation of the lost. It would entirely change the way we acted toward one another and toward the lost. This radical display of love for Christ and those He loves, would end the bad example of demanding our own way, or insisting that we get what we think is just. We would readily sacrifice of our rights, our finances, our preferences to see people come into the Kingdom from our laying down our rights.

Jesus demonstrated this spirit all the way to the tomb. They had no right to crucify him. He could have stopped it at any moment and put the Pharisees and Romans on crosses. But instead, He gave and gave and gave until He was poured out, a sacrifice in your place. He came to give. Consider Jesus application of Scripture next time you are tempted to "get even" with those who have wronged you. Think about it the next time you want to demand your rights.

Matt 5:43-48 (NIV)⁴³ *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Leviticus 19:18 tells us to love our neighbor. Apparently the people had added to the word of God. We do the same thing by attributing quotes to the Bible that are popular expressions. That seems to be the case here. In another passage Jesus explained that anyone you come in contact with is your neighbor. The Jews were trying to justify hating other by saying some were neighbors and other people were enemies. They tried to escape the confinement of the Law by

adding to it a definition that narrowed responsibility. Here, Jesus defines the passage and confronts the error of the addition to it by pointing to the heart of God. That is the standard of good after all. God gives sunshine and rain to all. He is gracious toward all. That is what is expected of you, Godlikeness. If you are called one of His children, then you need to resemble Dad. Dad doesn't just show kindness to those who obey His every command. He is good to all. Be like Dad! Be good to all. Show grace to all, just as God does, regardless of the recipients actions.

Anyone can be nice to nice people. The real test is can you be nice to the unkind like God is to you? You don't deserve his grace, but he gives it freely. Someone in your life may not deserve your generosity, but you are to be like God and go ahead and be gracious. That is how people will see that God has truly made a change in your life. You are not the self-centered person that they once knew. A change in personality is one of the greatest miracles God does. To go from a selfish person to a giving person shows that you realize how much God loves and cares for you, and that you can't out give God.

Lets review the interpretive methods Christ used in these three passages. The first was to look at the Spirit of the passage and apply it to the culture of the day. The Spirit behind the letter will keep us from misusing the passage. The second was that the Kingdom has confined our action and rights to a greater extent than the Law. The Law provided certain freedoms that we no longer have as those who seek to advance the Kingdom. We may find ourselves under a greater restraint than the Law when we live for the Kingdom of God. The last was a clarification of non-biblical or half-scriptural expression. Again the right of the new creation is limited because of seeking the Kingdom first. The last two show us that God's character is the real standard. The Law is interpreted as it is laid along side the character of God. We have this in the popular expression, "What would Jesus do?" These are some tough applications, and probably some of the most needed today.