

February 19, 2017

Matthew 5:38-48:

“Now That the Law Has Been Fulfilled”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In Matthew 5:21-48, our Lord deals with some heavy issues that include anger, murder, lust, adultery, swearing, retaliation and the creation of an enemies list. These are problems that dominate our news headlines each and every day. Probably about 80-90% of all our modern day movies and TV shows have one of these as their plot line so that if they were suddenly removed from society, then modern day movies and TV would for the most part be non-existent!

In order to really understand the sayings of our Lord today, we need to pause for a moment and remember that our Gospel lesson for this Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany really started three Sundays ago on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, where Jesus says:

You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others . . . 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 away from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:13-20).

This context is extremely important. It sets the stage for what we read today. Jesus did not come to *abolish* everything in the Old Testament, but he came to *fulfill* everything. Indeed he has! He has lived a perfect life on our behalf, doing what we ourselves could not possibly do, he suffered the hell that we deserve on the cross for all of our wrongdoing, and whoever believes that Jesus has done these things for them will not perish but have eternal life! **Now that Jesus has fulfilled all things**, it brings about a new situation into the world. Our relationship with the Old Testament has changed. The question then is this: How are Jesus' disciples going to regard the commandments as they carry out their mission to be salt and light? One thing is for sure, the religious/ceremonial law of the Old Testament was merely a picture of what was to come; Jesus is the real deal (Col 2:17; Heb 10:1). Consequently, we no longer need a temple or an altar to sacrifice lambs.

With the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled, and the new is here by faith. One day the new heaven and earth - the home of righteousness - will one day be seen with our soon to be incorruptible eyes! In the meantime, as we are salt and light in this fallen world, bearing witness to the great gift of salvation, we earnestly pursue what is right. Jesus did not die on the cross to pay for our sins in order that we might sin all the more. Rather, he saved us that we might be like him. The Christian craves to be perfect. Consequently, we should not relax the commandments, but strive to follow them as our Lord Jesus teaches us to do, not to earn our way to heaven, but because of his love toward us. "We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19)!"

Before we move on, there is another thing that I need to mention. **Now That The Law Has Been Fulfilled** in Christ, another change has taken place in our relationship to the Old Testament. As we look

forward to the Kingdom and the forever rule of our King, the old idea of the people of God living under a theocracy is over. In other words, no longer is civil authority to be intertwined with religious authority, as it was with the people of Israel. Keep in mind, civil authority came into existence because of a sinful world, and only exists as long as there is a sinful world. **Now That The Law Has Been Fulfilled**, we can be rest assured that, as this sinful world is passing away, so are all forms of civil authority, for they are unnecessary among the righteous. Things are changing. For now, until the return of Jesus, the governing authorities are not supposed to play church, and the church is not play like governing authorities. The church preaches the Word and administers the Sacraments - the means of grace. The governing authorities exercise the sword of every sort of punishment to protect the lawful from the lawless in society.

The apostle Paul in Romans 12:18-19 says to the church, "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. . . beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." Shortly thereafter, Paul then writes in 13:4 about the governing authorities as "God's servant . . . an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." The objective of the governing authorities is to protect the people, while the objective of the church is to convert people to Jesus Christ and sustain them in the true faith. The sword is not for the church to swing, and it is not the objective of government to administer the means of grace for the salvation of the world. All too often, both church and government get this confused in countless ways.

Now that Jesus has fulfilled all things, "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." Indeed! The governing authorities deal with "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and all matters of justice in the world; even warfare! This is not the duty of the church on earth. Besides, at the end of world all matters of justice will be attended to by he who comes to judge the living and the dead. As far as it is depends on you, if someone does an injustice to you as a child of God, turn the other cheek. However, if they would have you deny the truth, then the example of our Lord is most appropriate. Christ does not turn the other cheek when an official strikes him on the face before the High Priest. Rather, Jesus says "if I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me (John 18:23)?"

Again, in so far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. In other words, Christian love is willing to bear all kinds of abuse. Still, that does not mean that we cannot appeal to Caesar (the authorities) as Paul did when his life was in danger and the gospel was at stake (Acts 25:9-12), nor does that mean that we passively sit by and do nothing when the life of someone else is in danger, nor does it mean that we refuse to flee when we are threatened, for many Christians did flee Jerusalem at the command of Christ before the Romans came to surround the city, and there is much more we could say. Hopefully, you get the point and are able to apply the rest of Scripture to what Jesus says about other matters such as when we give away our clothing, or providing for those who beg, and lending to those who would want to borrow. In one sense we are bid to live lives of self-sacrifice, but Luther also correctly observes:

Christ is not telling me to give what I have to any scoundrel that comes along and to deprive my family of it or others who may need it and whom I am obliged to help, and then to suffer

want myself and become a burden to others. He is not saying that we should give and lend to everybody, but “to him who begs from us,” that is, to the one who really needs it.

Paul writes in Romans 13:8-10, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments . . . are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” Love is the giving and living of all that is true and good. It is about our relationship to others and above all God. Therefore, love is not lawless, it cannot embrace what is wrong as if it is right, it is not permissive, but always overcomes evil with good. Love is fulfilled in Jesus. And because Jesus touches us with his love, Christian love is always willing to bear all things while never forsaking what is true and good. It also overcomes evil with good. It loves a person all the way to the cross. In so far as it depends on us . . . Jesus says:

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, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott