

Dancing Around the Law

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Growing up as a Protestant, I was always confused about the Old Testament Law. On the one hand our church taught that we were no longer under the Law, but instead called to live by faith (Gal. 1:16). We were taught that relying on the Law would actually draw us away from faith and put us under the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:11-13). But I always wondered about things like the 10 Commandments, and Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:17-20. I knew that I could not simply jettison the Law, but I often found myself dancing around it, trying to take God's commandments, and Jesus' teaching seriously, while avoiding anything that seemed to be building my own righteousness. The result was often confusing.

Many of us have grown up under the teaching that Jesus fulfilled the Law, and fulfilled righteousness for those who believe, and so we are "*just sinners*" saved by grace. On the one hand, if I am referring to my standing before God, that's true. I am saved by God's unearned, self-giving love, favor and delight. My sins are forgiven, and I am freely loved by God.

However, on the other hand, the tendency to think of myself as "*just a sinner*," actually does violence to passages like Ephesians chapter one, where Paul takes great pains to describe the value that God has given us in Christ. We are favored children of God, created for glory, made in God's image. And, as a result of this new status, we are new creations in Christ, "*God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (Eph. 2:10). The work of Jesus does not leave us as helpless, merely forgiven (tolerated) people, but as new Re-Creations, learners/disciples of the ways of Christ. In Matthew chapters 5-7 we are given Jesus's perspective on the Law....

17 "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. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 5:17-20 (NIV)

Jesus says three things in these verses about the Law, intended to make us think about the nature of the spiritual life:

- The Law has not been abolished, but it is accomplishing something! What is it accomplishing? The renewal of righteousness in the earth (both in individuals and in society).

- The Christian's relationship to the Law is important. Jesus says that our relationship with the Law actually affects our status in the Kingdom and our reward (whether we will be greatest or least).
- If we want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, the Christian's righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and experts in the Law.

One way that many Christians have gotten around Jesus' words here, is the idea that Jesus was just emphasizing how impossible it is for us to be righteous – so that we can only be righteous in standing, not in practice. The problem with this view is that Jesus went on to talk about all of the different ways he was calling people to live, in fulfillment of the Law, and he ended his sermon by saying that anyone who did not build their life on these things would face a complete spiritual collapse.

So what are we to do? The “Law and the Prophets” that Jesus mentions, encompasses the entire Old Testament. Must we become experts and learn to fulfill every least demand? That strategy didn't work for the Pharisees!

But now, I want to talk about what Jesus meant by a righteousness that exceeds or surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and Law-experts. When Jesus spoke about this greater righteousness to which he called his followers, he offered examples.

I want to look at his first example of how to fulfill the Law. I believe that, if you will bear with me, you will see that what Jesus says here does two things:

1. It shows us how to live in the kind of righteousness that Jesus lived and taught, and
2. It prevents us from living under the curse of the Law through self-justifying behavior.

The Righteousness of the Pharisees and Law Experts Was Self-Justifying.

Matt. 5:21-22 *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”*

In Jesus's day, the Law had been around a long time. Law experts, Pharisees and teachers, had defined and re-defined how to fulfill the Law – it was their obsession. Many rulings had been handed down by the Jewish leaders about how to keep the Law, and how to protect people from breaking the Law. Jesus, in the verses above, was talking about both the Law, and one of the rulings the Jewish leaders had made to protect the Law.

The sixth commandment of the Law said, *“You shall not murder”* (Ex. 20:14). This was the commandment of God. The Jews had a very literal interpretation of this command. The Law literally prohibited murder – but not hatred or contempt. You could technically keep the Law but hate your brother. You could justify contempt and bitterness, so long as you did not do physical harm.

Jesus, on the other hand, said, *“I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”* In other words, Jesus stated what all of the Jews already knew that hatred and bitterness and contempt are sinful and wrong, and that God will hold accountable anyone who lives in these ways. Jesus pointed out that it is the contempt and hatred in our hearts that is the core of sin – murder is only the outward response to sin in the heart.

But Jesus went further than this. The custom of the Jews said, *“Anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court.”* “Raca” was an insult, meaning something like “Idiot” or “worthless.” It was the kind of insult that could start a fight between neighbors where tensions existed. The Jewish courts, in order to maintain the peace, had made this insult an offense against the Law for the sake of civil order. If you called someone “Raca” and were overheard, you could be called into court and fined or punished.

On the other hand, the word “fool” was from Scripture. Proverbs uses the word “fool” repeatedly. You could call someone a “fool” and claim that you were just quoting Scripture, using God’s word. You could show contempt in this way and yet justify yourself, even suggest you were honoring God.

But Jesus said, *“anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”* Why did Jesus make such an extreme pronouncement on the use of a word? Because there is extreme spiritual danger in being able to justify yourself while you hold someone in contempt.

Jesus gave this example as a way to expose the righteousness of the Pharisees. They believed that if they could find a way to justify their behavior, they need not pay attention to the motivations of their hearts. Our common tendency and desire is to declare ourselves right before God and people because we can justify our behavior. Jesus, here, does not merely say that this is insufficient before God – He declares that it is spiritually damaging and dangerous.

The Righteousness of Jesus Moves Beyond Self Concern.

Matt. 5:23-24 *“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”*

The old saying in Bible interpretation is that one should always find out what the “Therefore” is there-for. If we read Matthew 5:21-24 carefully, then we should wonder why Jesus seems to be connecting two very different situations: calling your brother a fool and offering your gift at the altar. Jesus seems to make a leap here from one subject to another, but the “Therefore” clearly connects the two teachings. So, what is it there for?

Jesus had just exposed the insufficiency and danger of self-justifying righteousness – something we all tend to do. In his next teaching, he addressed the kind of righteousness that he himself lived out and called his disciples to practice.

Now, the Law demanded that offerings be given on the Day of Atonement for the sins of the individual and the nation of Israel. Atonement was a week-long feast and every Jew was to

go up to Jerusalem and celebrate and sacrifice. The Temple would have been pretty crowded and getting to the altar would have been like getting to the front of the ride line in Disneyland.

So, imagine yourself having made a trip, on foot or by camel, thirty miles to Jerusalem. You have brought your family, and a perfect spotless lamb from your flock, for the sacrifice, and you've kept it spotless and perfect on the long trip. You wait in the lines until after all the more important people offer their sacrifices. Now, after a long day, you are finally there, with the priests, ready to offer this lamb. Then you remember "*that your brother has something against you...*". Maybe you called your brother a "*fool*" in a heated conversation. You might think, "Jesus taught that I should leave my sacrifice here at the altar, tell the priests I'll be back, and go off to find my brother to make things right. But wait! If my brother has some issue with me, shouldn't that be my brother's problem? Anyway, my brother can be unreasonable, and my offense was not that big a deal. My brother will get over it eventually." This attitude is how we usually justify ourselves. We do not want to be our brother's keeper (Gen. 4.9). We have enough on our plates without having to worry about our brother or sister.

But what is Jesus suggesting about righteousness? Should we maintain a constant hyper-vigilance to make sure that everyone is happy with us and no one is upset? No! Jesus himself did not live this way. The teaching is a hyperbole (overstatement in order to make a point). The point is this: that the righteousness that God desires is a care for the "*Other*," a spiritual and physical and emotional concern for others, driven by God's commandment to love. This kind of love and righteousness is what Jesus taught and practiced (Luke 15:3-7, John 10:11-18).

The righteousness of the Pharisees, on the other hand, was concerned only with their own personal standing before God. The Pharisees saw no need to be their brother's keepers. In fact, their lack of concern for others was one of the main issues that Jesus repeatedly warned them about (Matt.23:13,23).

When Jesus spoke about the righteousness of the Pharisees and Law experts, he meant the kind of righteousness where I am only concerned with whether I can justify myself and feel good about myself before God. This kind of self-justifying righteousness is, at its heart, selfish. Depending on the Law as a way to justify oneself before God was what Paul was always fighting against. This was the point, for many Jews, of being circumcised – it meant you were in good standing with God – *and* it meant that you were different-better than those who weren't circumcised. It was all about the individual person being justified in contrast to others. The Jews said you had to join the circumcision group to set yourself off from other Gentiles – to be justified by God. But Paul said, anyone who depends on the Law *in this way*, is under a curse.

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written:

"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith."

– Gal. 3:10-11

The Law, then, is a curse when we use it to justify ourselves, but it is the fulfillment of God's righteousness when we use it as a way to love God and others. Jesus himself confirmed this understanding (Luke 10:25-29).

How Can We Live This Way?

How can we move beyond our tendency towards self-justifying righteousness?

First, we need the honesty to confess to God that, within our own strength and desire, we are weak and sinful people. The truth is, if it just depends on my motivation and desire, I find the idea of being my brother's keeper and of loving the other or stranger, to be overwhelming. Before anything else, I need to bring my inability to the God who loves me faithfully, affectionately and self-givingly and confess my weakness.

Secondly, I need to recognize that the righteousness that Jesus taught is only possible as I open myself to receive love from God, which then can flow from my life to others. That means that I need to first spend some time in God's presence thinking about the pictures and words of God's love and grace for me in Scripture or remembering the kindnesses and gifts that God has shown and given to me in my life. Then I need to pray and ask God to help me to offer the same love He has shown me to others.

Thirdly, I then need to ask God to reveal to me where He is calling me to heal relationships, or share His love with a friend, or with another/stranger. As God reveals these things to me, I need to continue to remember and depend upon God's love for me and for the other person, and I need to be led by God, allowing God's Spirit to open ways to show love and open conversations that I don't know how to have.

God is committed to God's work! As we try to love God with all of our hearts and minds and strength and lives, and our neighbors as ourselves, God, in patient love, is a very present help (Ps. 24). We do not have to dance around the Law. We are called to be people who are loved by God and free to use the Law to understand how to love others, however imperfectly we do that. This is the "*narrow gate*" (Matt. 7:12-14).

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