



The Law of Christ

Matthew 22:36-39 with 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 with Matthew 5:17-20

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Gospel Lesson, Matthew 5:17-20

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks 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. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

New Testament Lesson, 1 Corinthians 9:20-21

¹⁹For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might gain all the more. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God’s law but am within Christ’s law) so that I might gain those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it.

Sermon, “The Law of Christ”

We all know what happens when a revolutionary party suddenly finds itself in power. It's one thing to shout angrily from the sidelines, but quite another to form a government and run a country. All kinds of things must be organized and dealt with; however, a rebel government will often ignore those things, and do so happily.

When this happens, two questions are asked. First, can this revolutionary movement really do the basic things that a government ought to do, but do them better than its predecessor? Or was it just making a lot of noise and now it's become clear that it was just a bunch of hot air. Or can it really deliver the goods?

Second, can this revolutionary movement remain true to itself and its original ideals even though it's now in power? Or will it become corrupt and end up just like all other governments, starting off in a blaze of glory and good intentions, but ending up riddled with corruption and muddle?¹

Here in the United States, 1967 was known as the “Summer of Love.” Nine years later, singer Jackson Brown responded to the hope and promises of that Summer of Love in his song, “The Pretender” in which he asks,

I want to know what became of the changes
We waited for love to bring
Were they only the fitful dreams
Of some greater awakening?

Jesus walked the roads of this world at a time when there were all kinds of revolutions bubbling up across the Roman Empire. And Jesus was launching a revolution as well, but it was a different sort of revolution. Yes, it was a revolution of love, but it was not the not the Haight-Ashbury love that Jackson Browne waited for in vain. It was something much more meaningful, something more transformational, and something eternal. But in order to bring about that revolution, Jesus had to do two things at the same time.

First, he had to show the Jews of his day that his movement—his revolution—really was the fulfilment of all that Israel had believed and longed for.

Second, he had to show that he and his followers were really living by (and also dying by) the new Way which he was announcing.

The tension between these two was, at times, fierce, and to this day, many people misunderstand it. Some think of Jesus as just a great Jewish teacher without much of a revolution. Others see him as so revolutionary that he left Judaism behind in order to establish something entirely new. Let's see what was really at the core of his revolution.

Last week as I was preaching two words leapt off the page and captured my attention. The phrase is found in verse 1 Corinthians 9:21, “Christ's law.” And I decided right then that I would preach on this passage today and together, we would discover the meaning of Christ's Law.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Vol. 1, pg. 39. This resource is used extensively through this sermon.

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As a revolutionary, Jesus indeed came to overthrow the powers of this world and establish his own government. That government is popularly known as the Kingdom of God. And with the advent of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God came near.

Every government must organize itself around certain beliefs and principles. Our country is organized around the belief “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”²

Those 28 foundational words are found in our Declaration of Independence. But for many years, those words mocked us because at its founding, our nation did not treat all men as equal. According to our Constitution, Blacks were only three-fifths equal to their white counterparts. Indigenous persons weren’t even that “equal.” Women were not treated as equal to men.

Thankfully, we’ve made much progress, but even today, Black and Brown immigrants who are in this country legally have discovered that they are often not treated as equals to the majority. LGBTQ persons are not treated as equals.

In order to obtain equality for all, our nation has passed a series of laws and Constitutional Amendments:

Slavery was abolished with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Incidentally Illinois was the very first state to ratify that Amendment.

Women were given the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment.

In 1924, Congress passed the Snyder Act which granted full U.S. citizenship to all Native Americans born in the U.S.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

In 1990, Congress enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act which protects people against discrimination based on disability.

Thanks to these laws and others like them, we have made progress. Those laws govern how we are to live as a nation. But that raises a question: What are the laws which Jesus Christ enacted to govern how we are to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God?

First, Matthew 5 tells us that Christ did not throw out the Hebrew law we find in the Old Testament. Jesus declares:

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

And then Jesus immediately goes into a teaching about some of what we now know as the Ten Commandments. At times, Jesus was known to use hyperbole, and he does so in this teaching. Instead of “Thou shalt not murder,” Jesus says “Thou shalt not hate or call names.” Instead of “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” Jesus says, “Thou shalt not look lustfully.”

² From *The Declaration of Independence*. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

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It almost looks like Jesus was adding new, impossibly strict laws to the Law that was first handed down to Moses. And remember, Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law. So do strict laws against lustful thoughts and hateful speech show help us fulfill the Law? I don't think that's the point Jesus was trying to make. Rather, we get a hint of what he was driving at a bit later in his teaching when Jesus broaches the subject of love. He says—

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Now we're on to something: it's not about creating stricter laws; it's about truly loving your neighbor. You cannot love your neighbor and hate your neighbor at the same time. Love and hate are mutually exclusive.

Now some of you may be saying, “I can do it. I can love someone and hate them at the same time.”

Would you just humor me please? This subject—this sermon—is complicated enough. If we go down that love/hate rabbit hole, it's going to take me three hours to preach this sermon, instead of just two. You cannot love someone and hate them at the same time. Love and hate are mutually exclusive.

The principle that we draw from that statement is that there is no room for hate in the heart of the Christian. Of course, every person who professes to be a follower of Jesus Christ will tell you that they don't hate anyone. And yet, they will exclude certain groups of people such as persons of color, people who don't speak English, immigrants, Muslims, and those who identify as LGBTQ. You'll hear them say that they “hate the sin but love the sinner.” And that's just a way of saying, “I don't fully accept you as you are.” And, “I won't love you.”

You'll hear them bemoan what they see as a growing “woke” culture in our country. And you'll hear them long for the way things used to be when they were growing up. In many cases, that's just a veiled way of longing for a time before Civil Rights and Women's Rights and Gay Rights. It's a longing for a time when white supremacy was perfectly acceptable. But that not only flies in the face of scripture; it also flies in the face of our Declaration of Independence and our U.S. Constitution.

Here's the thing: sometimes loving is easy. When I'm with my family or when I'm with people like me, it's easy to love them. But Jesus said, “If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?” (vs. 46). Jesus, who called the Pharisees and Levites to love the Samaritans calls us to love those who are different from us. He even calls us to love those whom we might consider to be unlovable.

And Jesus is audacious enough to demand that we love practically. The Good Samaritan didn't cross the road to avoid a man who had been robbed and beaten to a pulp. He helped him up, bandaged and dressed his wounds, gave him some wine, put him up in an inn,

and paid for his room and board. And then he said, “Go and do likewise.” In other words, find someone who’s been beaten down by life, and lift him—or her—up. (Luke 10:25-37)

Later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is asked a legal question:

³⁶ Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

³⁷ He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Love is more than lip service or a warm, fuzzy feeling in one’s heart. In Matthew 25, Jesus welcomes and rewards those who fed the hungry, quenched the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the needy, tended the sick, and visited the imprisoned.

Let’s face it: it’s not easy to love the Jesus way. It’s demanding. It takes us out of our comfort zones. It might even take us into some really uncomfortable places. But if we’re going to be law-abiding citizens in the Kingdom of God, then we are going to love practically and without discrimination.