

## **Matthew 5:17-20**

### **Radically different**

I have in my hand a very important book. I have to admit to my shame that I have hardly looked at it in the past 37 years. However, a new edition was published recently and this is it. It is the **Highway Code**. It has become a lot bigger over the years and the latest edition got mentioned in the press largely because of section 148 which deals with distractions which must be avoided:

- Loud music
- Trying to read maps
- Inserting a CD or tuning the radio
- Arguing with your passengers
- Eating and drinking
- Smoking

There was so much fuss about these things and what exactly they meant that, certainly on the discussion I listened to, people seemed to forget that the point of the Highway Code is to help us use the roads safely and legally.

I'll put this to one side and come back to it later.

The verses we have read this morning from Matthew's gospel are not easy to understand but they are important to understand, because they are the foundation for the rest of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Up to this point Jesus has been talking about the **Kingdom of Heaven**; the Kingdom has arrived because the King himself is here; he has talked about the King's people, those who know that they are spiritually poor; at the same time the King's people are the salt and light of the world, acting as salt in preserving what would otherwise rot away in human society; shedding light into the darkness of human evil and rejection of God.

Jesus' listeners were for the most part steeped in the Old Testament. As they listened to Jesus they would automatically have been asking themselves:

“How does this new teaching fit in with what we already know? Does it simplify the Law of

Moses (EXPLAIN)? Reinterpret it? Or even abolish it? If Jesus is a new Moses, as some were saying, where are the links with the past?"

It is in answer to this that Jesus says:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Matthew 5:17)

Clearly, a big change is happening. In Luke 16:16 Jesus explains it like this:

"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John (the Baptist). Since that time the good news of the Kingdom of God is being preached"

The new is replacing the old. But how?

The key word in Matthew 5:17 is *fulfil*. Christ has not come to *abolish* the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) but to *fulfil* it. Matthew has already been dropping hints about this. In his account of the Christmas story, Matthew more than once states that Jesus even in his birth, is fulfilling OT prophecy. In his baptism, Jesus himself says that he is fulfilling all righteousness; he is completing what God

requires of him as he begins his ministry. When Jesus talks about fulfilling the OT he means that he is bringing to completion all that it pointed forward to. What was anticipated was now coming to fruition; the bud was opening out as a flower.

Jesus was not destroying the past. You may remember when we looked at the temptations of Christ how he quoted the OT every time in order to defeat Satan. He recognised that the OT was the expression of God's character and God's will and as such cannot be changed. Every detail of the Law of God remains valid until 2 things happen (verse 18):

- Until heaven and earth pass away
- Until all things are accomplished

I.e. until God's plan for the salvation of mankind is complete, the plan which Jesus came to achieve.

There are many ways in which Jesus fulfilled the Law of the OT, but I would like to pick out just one.

Jesus fulfilled the moral Law. What is that, you may well ask. The moral law is summed up in the 10 commandments. Let's have a quick memory test – do we know the 10 commandments?

1. No others gods before me
2. No idols
3. Do not misuse God's name
4. Keep the Sabbath day holy
5. Honour your father and your mother
6. Do not murder
7. Do not commit adultery
8. Do not steal
9. Do not give false testimony
10. Do not covet

Jesus went on to teach that it is not enough to avoid committing murder; our attitude to other people has to be right as well.

And he fulfilled the Law not only by teaching it but by living it. He did what no other person has ever done; he lived up to God's standards. How can we be sure of that? Here is the testimony of Simon Peter, a man who for 3

years lived alongside Jesus as he walked the dusty roads of Palestine, shared his friendship and experienced the joys and frustrations of everyday life:

“He committed no sin  
And no deceit was found in his mouth” (1Peter 2:22)

Notice too the authority with which Jesus spoke. “I have come to fulfil the Law”. Teachers of the time might argue over the exact meaning of OT commandments and quoted other teachers. But Jesus here and so often elsewhere says “I tell you”. He says also “I have come”. He claims to have come into the world of his own free will; he claims to have a purpose in coming into the world which he says here is to fulfil God's Law.

Jesus was the most truly humble man, but that should never obscure the fact that he knew who he was and why he was here on earth. The Law remains valid for all time, but only because Jesus fulfils it in a way which none of us can. None of us can appear before God and claim to

have kept his Law. We are saved, not by keeping God's Law but by accepting God's grace; that grace which is made available to us by the only one who could firstly keep and then also fulfil, that Law.

I would like us to focus our attention on verse 20 of our reading. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is where Jesus calls his people to a deeper and more radical obedience. That is what he is saying in verse 20:

“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Judaism at the time of Jesus was divided into 4 main groups. There were the **Essenes**, who are not mentioned in the gospels, but were a group who were so disgusted at the way Temple worship had been corrupted that many of them withdrew into the desert. Jesus did the exact opposite by mixing with many different types of people. He never said that his followers should withdraw permanently from society,

although some Christians have done just that. We cannot be the salt or light of the earth if we avoid other people.

Then there were the **Zealots**. They also believed that society was corrupt, but they wanted to change the world by establishing God's kingdom on earth through violence if necessary. At least one of Jesus' disciples was a member of this group, Simon the Zealot. Others, like Judas, may also have been. Jesus refused to take the path of political revolt. On many occasions people wanted to make him an earthly king, but he refused. He knew that what was needed was not a new system but a new heart. And when Jesus was being arrested and Peter drew his sword and attacked one of the crowd who had come to get Jesus, Jesus told him to put his sword away. Even today there are those who try to establish the kingdom of God by force, but that was never Jesus' way and still is not.

Then there were the **Sadducees**, a group who tried to be like the Greek and Roman invaders.

They thought that they could preserve the Jewish faith by becoming like the world around. It's so tempting to compromise, to become like the society around you. Sadly, many Christians try to do that today. Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount warns us off compromise, or letting ourselves being moulded by the world around.

Amazingly, the **Pharisees** are the group who were most admired because they took God's Law seriously. They devoted their lives to the Law of God. The teachers of the Law were the professionals who set about applying the Law of God to every possible situation in life. The trouble was that they got so bogged down in the details that they missed the true meaning and purpose of the Law. They domesticated God and his Law and brought it down to their level, to such an extent that they actually thought they could keep it.

If it been the Highway Code they were dealing with, they would have had plenty to say about what you were or were not allowed to do whilst

driving. I can just imagine their debate about what constitutes an argument. Are you allowed to disagree with a passenger as you drive? Can you give the children a row? But in the process they would have forgotten that the whole point of the Code is safe driving, not legal nit-picking.

The Pharisees became proud – they actually believed that they could keep the Law of God - and so kept themselves out of the Kingdom of God. Image meant everything to them. They had to be seen to be good.

The spirit of the Pharisees is alive and well in good conservative, evangelical churches. The danger is that we become over concerned about lists of do's and don'ts, we live up to some sort of external standard of what that means and we miss out on the whole purpose of the radical teaching of Jesus.

Philip Yancey in his book *What's so amazing about grace* describes the church he was brought up in. Many things were frowned upon or prohibited in the church:

- Smoking
- Drinking alcohol
- Wearing make-up or jewellery
- Long hair for men
- Short skirts for women
- Going to the cinema
- Listening to rock music

Somehow his church managed to judge people's level of spirituality by these external criteria. Yet the same church had lost sight of the love of God to such an extent that they refused to let anyone into their services whose skin was not white! I find it shocking that the name of Jesus is dragged through the mud when Christians act like that. But then, it's easy to see other people's faults ...

Let's look at this positively:

What does a church look like when its righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees?

- If the world despises a notorious sinner, the church will love him or her.

- If the world ignores the poor and suffering, the church will offer food and healing.
- If the world oppresses, the church will raise up the oppressed.
- If the world despises AIDS victims, the church will offer Christ's love.
- If the world seeks profit and self-fulfilment, the church seeks sacrifice and service.
- If the world demands revenge, the church gives out grace.
- If the world destroys its enemies, the church loves them.

At least, that is the New Testament picture of the church. It is a radically different kingdom, a colony of heaven in a hostile world.

But let's be absolutely clear about one thing. We are not called to be the salt and light of the world in order to impress God, earn brownie points and work our way into heaven. Do you remember the start of the Sermon on the Mount?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

We need to come to God with empty, open hands; empty because we have nothing to offer being spiritually poor; open because we want to receive his forgiveness, his grace, his purpose for our lives.

And then we need to go out into the world with a passion to become more like Christ, which does not make us odd but far more truly human than we ever were before. The world desperately needs to see Christians, not as a group who are following some external code, but as people whose lives are authentic. The world needs to experience Christ's revolution.

As someone has said:

“What the world needs is not more salesmen for Christianity, but more free samples”

If we are citizens of the kingdom we are called to know the king. To know the king is to understand that his demands summon us not into the slavery of following a code, but into the fulfilment of relationship with our heavenly

father. It's the difference between on the one hand doing something because we have to do it and it's a burden; and on the other hand doing something because we love someone and we want to please them.

Jesus himself said in Matthew 11:28-30:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.”