

## **Law and Love**

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

#### **Introduction**

When I first applied to attend Philadelphia College of the Bible (PCB) in 1993 (now Cairn University), I had to sign an agreement form agreeing that I would abstain from alcohol while a student (which I believe to be a good rule). Not long before my acceptance to the college, all students had to agree to a list of standards; there were ten, now there are currently seven every student must agree to follow.<sup>1</sup> Permit me to share the three of the standards that are no longer on the list:

1. Gambling is viewed as an unwise use of God-given resources and therefore is not acceptable in any form. Students are not to attend places where gambling is the source of business or entertainment. Playing cards normally associated with gambling are not permitted in college facilities, on college grounds or off-campus at college-sponsored activities.
2. Because a significant number of evangelical Christians view social dancing as a morally questionable activity, society dancing is not permitted on or away from the campus. Choreography in drama and musical productions is permitted.
3. There are varying attitudes among Christians regarding attendance at movie theaters. That being the case, the College desires not to be offensive to the conscience of any believer. Students are not permitted to attend movie theaters while registered for an academic semester. At other times students are free to make discretionary decisions in these areas, while being sensitive and submissive to the standards of their local church and family.

I do not think playing cards will lead to excessive gambling, nor do I think all forms of social dancing is morally questionable, and I certainly do not think seeing a movie in a movie theater will bring undue spiritual harm to other Christians.

Cairn University (formerly PCB) still has a list of standards required that all student must submit to, but their current list is more reflective of the standard of living we see in the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of the New Testament. In 1988 there were dangers facing the Church in America that restricting the use of cards, social dancing, and movie theaters were understood to be helpful in maintaining a level of holiness the Bible calls the Christian to. For clarity permit

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of Cairn University's current list of standards for enrolled students, see their link to their student handbook: <https://cairn.edu/undergraduate-student-handbook>.

me to illustrate for you the standard of living the Word of God calls the child of God; the following is one of the many we find in the New Testament:

**“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”** (Colossians 3:5–10)

I personally have some rules I have created for myself that I need as I seek to live a life that honors the God who redeemed me. We are all called to holiness; the problem is when we create rules for others to follow outside of the Bible so that they will live up to a standard of holiness we believe is acceptable. This is what legalism is and the motive for such rules often has more to do with what people see and less to do with matters of the heart and mind. I believe that what Jesus said in verses 17-20 is antivenom for the poison of both legalism and not taking sin seriously enough.

### **The Word of God Points Us to Jesus (vv. 17-18)**

Shortly after I became a Christian, I was given the impression by well-meaning Christians around me that the New Testament was for the Christian while the Old Testament was helpful for our understanding of the New Testament, it was really meant for the Jewish person before Jesus’ birth. For some time, I treated the Bible as a two-part volume where the second part was the most important part that I really had to listen to.

After I received my first study bible and started reading it, I noticed that every statement Jesus made was in red. My impression from seeing the words of Christ in red was that his words were more important than the words in black. Lous Klopsh published the first red-letter New Testament in 1899, Klopsh explained why he thought his red-letter edition of the New Testament was important:

Modern Christianity is striving zealously to draw nearer to the great Founder of the Faith. Setting aside mere human doctrines and theories regarding Him, it presses close to the Divine Presence, to gather from His own lips the definition of His mission to the world and His own revelation of the Father... The Red Letter Bible has been prepared and issued in the full conviction that it will meet the needs of the student, the worker, and the searchers after truth everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

For anyone wondering what Jesus thought of the Old Testament, he said: **“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”** (v. 17). What is the “Law” and the “Prophets”? The Law is the first five books of the Old Testament, and the prophets refer the rest of the Old Testament. In other words, Jesus is the point of the Old Testament, for it is all about him!

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day rejected him because they didn’t think that he fit in with their understanding of the Scriptures, so they looked for ways to silence and eventually kill him. At

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<sup>2</sup> Crossway, “The Origins of the Red-Letter Bible,” March 23, 2006.

one point Jesus said to these same people: **“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.... For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words”** (John 5:39-40, 46-47).

Jesus is the answer to Adam’s rebellion (Gen. 3:15). He is better than Moses in that he offers a permanent solution to man’s sin problem (Deut. 18:15-19). Jesus is greater than David (2 Sam. 7:13-14), for he is the true Prince of peace who will inherit a kingdom that will never end (Dan. 4:34-35; Isa. 9:6-7). He is the suffering servant who redeems the guilty (Isa. 53; Micah 7:18-20) and will one day come to make all things new (Isa. 65:17-25; Mal. 4:1-3). Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament because all of it pointed to him and continues to point to him.

Not only did Jesus come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, but he also believed that they were divinely inspired by God. In fact, Jesus said that the smallest details of the Scriptures down to the iota and dot marked on certain Hebrew letters will not pass away until all of it is fulfilled. This is why the apostle Paul wrote of the Scriptures, **“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work”** (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Jesus believed and taught that the Scriptures are one story where he is the main point. He is the protagonist, Satan is the antagonist, and it is mankind he came to redeem and God the Father he sought to glorify in all that he did on earth. Listen, you are not the hero in the story. Jesus is. You are not David slaying the Goliaths in your life, Jesus is a greater David and we are the weak and cowering Israelites on the sidelines. Jesus believed that the Law and the Prophets were without error, he hungered after the Scriptures, he memorized the Scriptures, he was strengthened by the Scriptures, and he depended upon the Scriptures, and we ought to do the same.

### **The Word of God Shows Us How to Live (v. 19)**

Since Jesus fulfills the Law and Prophets and all of Scripture is from God and all of it serves to show us how we ought to live, the Scriptures must be taught, read, studied, and applied by the people of God. This is why Jesus strongly states in verses 19, **“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 5:19).

Consider what the Scriptures are. The Scriptures are the Word of God which means that from Genesis to Revelation the Bible claims at least 3,000 times to be “The Word of the Lord.” Of the 66 books that make up your Bible and the hundreds of years and many different contributors who were guided by the Holy Spirit, it is without error and it has been given for the people of God to know how to live for God and to enjoy the freedom we can only know through a life yielded to God.

Every time you open your Bible and read the words contained in it, you hear the same voice that powerfully created the billions of suns like ours; it is that same God who has given us a book with His words in it to move and shape us as His people. In this light, consider Psalm 19:7-11,

**The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.**

Jesus warns us that to trivialize any of Scripture is serious. The Greek word for “relax” is *lyō*, and it literally means, “to set aside.” To cherry pick what you think is good in the Bible and what you would like to live without is dangerous, for to do so is to say to God: “I will decide from all that you have said what is important and what is unimportant. What I should obey and what I should disregard.” The one who does this will be called, “**least in the kingdom.**” What this means is that you will stand before Jesus and will have to answer for what you trivialized in his Word and what you honored.

As a Christian, you need not fear hell, but you will be held accountable for the way you lived your life and how you responded to his Word (see 1 Cor. 3:10-15). Here is what we are told will happen on that day: “...each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:13–15). Jesus even said, “**If you love me, you will keep my commandments**” (John 14:15). However, the one who obeys what he reads in Scripture, Jesus promises, “...will be great in the kingdom of heaven.” The Christian will stand before Jesus and will be rewarded for what he has done, but it is possible that you may stand before him and receive nothing more than entrance into his kingdom.

On the day Ed Hardesty delivered the charge to me when I was set aside and ordained as a minister of the Gospel, he used the passage from 2 Timothy 4:1-5, which states:

**I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. (2 Timothy 4:1–6)**

It has been true throughout the ages that some in the Church prefer to listen to a sermon that entertains or comforts them in their sin rather than to hear a Word from the Lord that convicts or cuts for the purpose of holiness. As a pastor, I am called to give you what you need, and this is

why I am warned from the Bible, **“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness”** (Jas. 3:1).

### **The Word of God Leads us to the Grace of God (v. 20)**

Finally, Jesus concludes, **“I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** The Scribes (who studied and commented on the Law) and Pharisees calculated that the Law contained 248 commands and 365 prohibitions. They created the Mishnah which were rules created for the purpose of obeying the 613 rules in the Old Testament Law. Most people in Jesus’ day did not observe the Mishnah because they did not think they could, but the Pharisees did. For example, in the Mosaic Law, we are told to **“keep the Sabbath holy.”** But to make sure people did just that, thirty-nine separate rules were created down to the number of steps one was permitted to take while walking to the number of letters you were allowed to write on the Sabbath before it was considered work. The Mishnah was man made, but the Mosaic Law was holy Scripture; Jesus repeatedly made that clear to the religious leaders and they hated him for it.

The Pharisees and scribes made the Law and Prophets a burden upon people when it was meant to point them to Jesus. They made God out to be an angry deity instead of the God who is equally just as he is good and loving. Of these religious leaders Jesus said: **“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves”** (Matt. 23:13–15).

So, what does Jesus mean in verse 20? What he means is that the self-made righteousness of the Pharisees and Scribes is not enough to meet the standard of a holy God. The only person who is righteous enough is the one the Law and the Prophets pointed to, namely Jesus. The one who finds their righteousness in God’s son and hungers after him is the one who will enter the kingdom of heaven; not because of works we have done, but because of the work he has done. The one who will enter the kingdom of heaven is the poor in spirit whose only hope of righteousness is the righteousness that can only be found in Jesus Christ who became sin for us upon a cross we deserved (2 Cor. 5:21).

### **Conclusion**

Legalism always says, “Look at what I can do.” The point of the Bible is simply this, “Look at what God will do for you through Jesus Christ.” Legalism says: “I am capable.” True Christianity say: “Jesus paid it all.” Legalism says: “The gateway to holiness is what I must do.” True Christianity says: “The gateway to holiness is through what Jesus already did do.” Legalism says: “You must work for your righteousness.” True Christianity says: “You can rest is the finished work Jesus accomplished on the cross for your righteousness.” The difference between legalism and Jesus is that legalism says you are enough, while Jesus says that he is enough.