**A Greater Righteousness**

Based on [Matt. 5:17-26](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt5.17-26)

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There are two parts to this gospel. In the first, Jesus teaches about his relationship to the Law. In the latter part, he diagnoses the full measure of the law as pertaining not only to the outward works, but the condition of the heart.

The Law of God, simply put, is how God says things should and shouldn’t be. In the opening passages, Jesus sets the Law of God straight in order to teach it correctly. And the first thing he does is affirm that Law of God is good. **Jesus did not come to abolish the Law; or to rewrite the law; or to relax the law.** No, Jesus came to restore a right understanding of what it means to fear, love and trust in God above all things. He has come to fulfill the Law.

Beloved in the Lord, there are many temptations in this world, and many agents of temptation. **Now there is only one true tempter, the devil. But many people will try to incite you to sin with sweet sounding teachings that twist God’s word into knots and hide the truth, just as the serpent did with Eve.** And the simplest way to do this is to abolish, change or relax the Law.

Jesus did not come to relax the law for believers. It’s just as strict as it ever was. Neither did he abolish the law for anybody. The same law applies equally to everyone, and he teaches rich people and poor people, the weak and the strong, believers and unbelievers. God’s law applies equally to all of them, and without mercy. You will not find mercy in the Law. **You don’t receive a handicap if you had a difficult childhood; or if your spouse makes it hard for you to love him**. It doesn’t matter if you‘ve been treated unfairly in the world, or whether you have more responsibilities than most. The God’s Law applies equally to all people.

This is not to say you shouldn’t have empathy and pity for people who have harder lives than you. **But your love, or your pity, or your sense of fairness, do not change, cannot change God’s Law one iota**. This, I believe, is another mistake that has led churches in recent centuries, to abolish the practice of baptizing babies. They say that a child isn’t as responsible for breaking the Law as an adult. That is certainly true in human governance, but with God’s law, it is eternal, fixed in the heavens, and circumstances cannot change something’s nature.

An illustration. A doctor says to his patient, “*I’m sorry to have to tell you this but, you have stage 4 cancer and you probably don’t have more than a few months to live.*” And the patient says, “**What? In my time of life? I just can’t deal with cancer now. I’m about to get a promotion at work that will require more time and energy…I can’t do chemo now. I have kids to raise and my wife can’t do it alone. Plus, my life insurance expired last month and so I will leave my family in quite a financial bind. This is just a really bad time for me to get a cancer diagnosis. Isn’t there anything you can do, doctor?**” And the doctor says…what?... “*Well, under normal circumstances I’d say you only have a few months to live and it doesn’t look good; but since you’ve made your case and appealed for leniency, I suppose I could knock the cancer down to a stage 1, put the chemo on hold, but monitor carefully, and by all accounts, you’ll beat this thing and can expect to live a long life*.” “**Thank you, doctor!”**

This is a joke of course. No doctor could do that, because everyone knows that circumstances cannot change nature. **If you stumble and fall off a cliff, gravity won’t stop working if you can make a good case for your life.** The dead battery in your car won’t crank the engine if only you can make it understand how important it is for you to get to work on time.

In the same way, The Law of God is eternal, immutable, and there is no leniency to be found there. **His perfect Law does not change with your circumstances.** The wages of sin is death; it is written. If you’ve sinned, you deserve death and hell, and no doctor can give you a more favorable diagnosis.

Jesus did not come to change the diagnosis of mankind. He came to confirm it, so that you can acknowledge the problem and seek help. **He doesn’t preach a gospel of “It’s okay”, or “no harm no foul” or “It’s not as bad as it sounds”.** He says, you are dead in your trespasses and sins and he calls you to acknowledge this cold hard fact and repent. He preached and still preaches a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

A debt is owed for your sin. That’s the law. But there is no law saying that it cannot be paid by another. The problem is that neither you, nor any of your relatives or neighbors has enough spiritual capital to redeem you. Here’s another law, from Psalm 49:7-9, “**Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice**.” The law doesn’t say it is illegal to ransom another man, it only says that no man has sufficient means to do so. Sure, anyone can say your sins are forgiven; but it’s empty words without the means to do it. It’s too costly. And not only can another man not afford to pay for your sins, all men need the same redemption for themselves.

Only God can make atonement, and so he did. God became man in Jesus Christ and paid the price. He came to to pay the atonement price for your sins. **He didn’t abolish the law, redact it or relax it. He fulfilled it. “The wages of sin is death”, so he paid it.** “There is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood”, so he shed it. Those who refuse the diagnosis refuse the remedy, and their guilt remains. But to those who believe the diagnosis and seek the remedy have faith; and that faith is counted to them as righteousness.

And this righteousness is a greater righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees. Now, because our sins have been paid for by the body and blood of Christ on the Cross, and because our sins have been forgiven by the body and blood of Christ at this altar, we should love one another and forgive one another.

In the latter part of this gospel, our dear Lord Jesus Christ teaches us about the Christian love we are to have for one another. He also acquaints us with the obstacles which tend to impede such love. And he would have us know that we don’t really have Christian love if we have and nurture hatred and violence in our hearts.

Remember, Jesus did not come to relax the law. The Pharisees and hypocrites had done a fine job of that already. **They believed and taught that righteousness only requires that I don’t strike anyone, or do them physical violence.**  Well, most people are innocent of murder, but Jesus teaches that hatred and malice in the heart and vented through the lips is equally damning. True righteousness is love that issues from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

We cannot look into our own hearts, let alone the hearts of others to see whether love is there. **The heart is deceitful above all things; and desperately sick; we cannot understand it** (Jer 17:9). So Jesus gives other signs of a pure heart. “Have you murdered anyone today” is a pretty low bar for love and most people can pass that examination. But what about other conflicts? If someone accuses you of wrong, you must try to make it right and eagerly seek them out to reconcile.

This is as timely today as ever, as the largest Christian church in the United States is lead by a Pastor who’s central message is “cut negative people out of your life.” **Imagine if God lived by that gospel and decided to cut the negative people out of his life?** The 7.5 billion people on earth would perish in an instant, and the whole human race would be in hell.

But he didn’t cut them out. Instead he sent his Son to come and reconcile with the world. And though the world could find no fault with him, they crucified him. **But God raised him on the third day, and he gathered and still gathers his sheep in the church, while the children of this world carry on blissfully unaware that someday it will be handed over to the judge.** They will not escape judgment, but will spend eternity in prison paying off a debt of sin they can’t afford. But you who repent have come to terms with your accuser, and on the last day will stand in the judgment, and enter in the glory of the master who bought you at a price.

So love your enemies from the heart, as God in Christ your Redeemer has loved you.