**The Sermon on the Mount**

**Sunday May 20, 2018**

**“The Heart of the Matter” (Matthew 5:17-26)**

**1. Introduction: *The Year of Living Biblically***

One of the more interesting books that I read lately was entitled, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible.* The publisher’s blurb on the back of the booknicely describes the gist of the book, “Raised in a secular family but increasingly interested in the relevance of faith in our modern world, A.J. Jacobs decides to dive in headfirst and attempt to obey the Bible as literally as possible for one full year. The resulting spiritual journey is at once funny and profound, reverent and irreverent, personal and universal, and will make you see history’s most influential book with new eyes.” The set-up for this book may seem to be rather flippant. An atheist who is interested in religion decides to live according to the Bible for one year. But he took his quest very seriously and as I read his book I learned a great deal about religion, the Bible and the tricky task of biblical interpretation.

In preparation for what he would call the *Bible project*, Jacobs read through the whole Bible, a task of marathon reading that he did for four weeks straight, five hours a day. He writes, “As I read, I type in to my PowerBook every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice I find in the Bible. When I finish, I have a very long list. It runs seventy-two pages. *More than seven hundred rules.* The scope is astounding. All aspects of my life will be affected – the way I talk, walk, eat, bathe, dress and hug my wife.

Many of the rules will be good for me and will, I hope make me a better person by the end of the year. I’m thinking of: No lying. No coveting, No stealing. Love your neighbour. Honor your parents. Dozens of them. I’ll be the Gandhi of the Upper West Side.

But plenty of other rules don’t seem like they’ll make me more righteous at all. Just more strange, more obsessive, more likely to alienate friends and family: Bathe after sex. Don’t eat fruit from a tree planted less than five years ago. Pay the wages of a worker every day.

And a good number of the rules aren’t just baffling, but federally outlawed. As in: Destroy idols. Kill magicians. Sacrifice oxen” (Jacobs, *Year of Living Biblically,* p. 8).

A.J. Jacobs musings about the Bible and his list of over 700 rules should make us think about the Bible and its impact on our lives, especially in light of Jesus’ remarkable declaration in this morning’s Gospel lesson.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For 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.Therefore, 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” (5:17-20).

Taken at face value, Jesus’ words seem to suggest that all of the laws of the Old Testament are still in full force. Yet, there is a wider context, both within this passage and the entire Bible that should be considered before we come to any conclusions about the implications of this passage for our Christian lives. So, let’s dig and unpack this passage a bit and try to come to some concrete thoughts about it.

**2. Jesus and the Law: *I have come not to abolish but to fulfill***

Jesus’ words regarding the Law need to be considered within the context of his life and ministry. Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, emerged on the scene proclaiming that the kingdom of God was breaking in to this world. The Beatitudes, which we reflected upon last week, boldly declare that God’s kingdom was accomplishing something very new as it reached down to lift up the poor in spirit, the sorrowful, the humble, the hungry and the thirsty (5:3-12). As Jesus carried out his ministry he demonstrated the reality of the kingdom by reaching out to the most vulnerable, alienated, and marginalized and showing them God’s love and forgiveness. Yet, amidst the newness of the kingdom, Jesus needed to point out the continuity between his work and God’s covenant with Israel. He did not want to give the impression that his challenges to the religious status quo meant that he was jettisoning the Jewish Law, the foundational texts which guided God’s people. Jesus’ foundational discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, needed to address any misunderstanding that might emerge about his messianic mission. So, in a forthright manner he declared, “Don’t think that I have come to *abolish* the Law or the Prophets” (5:17). His words went on to stress the immutable and enduring nature of the Law, **“**For 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” (5:18). If this is the case, why then do we as followers of Jesus, no longer keep the *all* the laws of the Old Testament? Remember this list includes not just the Ten Commandments, but all of the *613* laws within the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) (Jacobs, *Year of Living Biblically,* p. 69). So, why do we no longer keep kosher, observe the traditional Sabbath or ritually circumcise our male offspring? Are we setting aside even the *least* of the commandments? (5:19).

While Jesus was careful to emphasize the *connection* between himself and the Law and Prophets, he expressed that this connection was not merely a flat line of static sameness. When Jesus emerged on the scene, it was a momentous, earth-shattering event. It was the climax of the covenant. So, the line between Jesus and the Old Testament is not a flat one, but it is angled upward, showing a significant *development*. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but *to fulfill them* (5:17). There are, however, various interpretations as to what Jesus meant by *fulfilling the Law*. Did Jesus fulfill the Law by his complete observance of it? Did he fulfill the Law by inaugurating a new law that transcends the old? Did he fulfill the Law by explaining its original intent? Did he fulfill the Law by establishing a new righteousness based on the love command? In many ways all these options are compatible ways to explain Jesus’ fulfilment of the Law. New Testament scholar, Donald Senior explains it like this, “The words and actions of Jesus the Messiah are not only completely in accord with the law but reveal its God-given intent by bringing its purpose to completion, particularly through centering the law on the love command (Senior, *Matthew,* p. 75).

Matthew tells a story in his Gospel about a time when Jesus was debating the religious leaders in the Temple during the last week of his life (22:34-40). When Jesus won the debate with the Sadducees, another religious group, the Pharisees, sent in one of their aces to go toe-to-toe with Jesus. This guy quickly got down to business and asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the *greatest*?”In response, Jesus recited the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)*,* a central prayer within Judaism, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’This is the greatest and first commandment.” But he didn’t stop there, he went on to add, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments *hang all the law and the prophets.*”

A way out of the conundrum regarding the relationship between Christianity and the Old Testament law is *love.* Love God and love your fellow humans and the rest will fall into place. Now, I recognize that this is a simple solution to a complex issue within Christian theology and biblical interpretation. On the other hand, *love* does offer a helpful summary of the essence of the Law. If we love God, we’ll faithfully obey, worship and serve him. If we love our neighbour, we’ll do good things, not bad to him. For example, a little later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. *This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets*” (7:12).

**3. The Better Righteousness: *Unless your righteousness surpasses***

Jesus *fulfilled* the Law by pointing to its God-given intent in the love command, yet he also encouraged his disciples to go beyond its conventional observance and aim toward a *better righteousness.* In verse 20 he declares,“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The scribes and the Pharisees were known for their rigorous observance of the Law, but by following the rules they weren’t necessarily doing the will of God. Oftentimes, they focused on the minutiae of the Law and missed the heart of the matter. For instance, one time the Pharisees condemned Jesus’ hungry disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8). In response, Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6, “‘*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*,” indicating that their focus on rules and ritual led to a neglect of the greater virtue of mercy. In the final week of his life Jesus confronted the Pharisees, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. *But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness*. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former (Matthew 23:23).

Jesus encourages his disciples to do far better than this and he goes on to describe the nature of the *better righteousness* (5:21-48). On the heels of Jesus’ call to a better righteousness, we find a set of *six* *antitheses*. They are called the *antitheses,* because in each one Jesus is drawing a *contrast* between a commandment and his reinterpretation of it. In all six cases Jesus says, “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .” In this way he demonstrates the continuity between himself and the Old Testament Law, while showing the development to something greater. In a nutshell, he moves beyond the letter of the law to the heart of the law.

The letter of the law says don’t commit murder, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter - *anger* toward another person. He even stressed that being reconciled with your brother or sister was more important that offering a sacrifice to God. The letter of the law says don’t commit adultery, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter - *gazing* at another person with sexual desire in your heart. The letter of the law says that ending a marriage should be quick and easy, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter – it’s an option for the severest of situations. The letter of law says that you can swear to God when you make a promise, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter - be a person of integrity and keep your promises. The letter of the law says revenge is acceptable, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter – an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. The letter of the law says to love our neighbour, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter – *my enemy is my neighbour.* Jesus says, “Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” All these antitheses call us to exercise a sacrificial, redemptive love for others, which is the heart of the matter.

But to get to the heart of the matter and to aim for the better righteousness is not something we can do on our own strength. A. J. Jacobs started his year of living biblically with these words, “It’s the first day, and I already feel like the water is three feet over my head. I have chosen September 1 to start my project, and from the moment I wake up, the Bible consumes my life. I can’t do anything without fearing I’m breaking a biblical law. Before I inhale or exhale, I have to run through a long mental checklist of the rules” (Jacobs, *Year of Living Biblically,* p. 18). At several junctures in his year-long journey, he demonstrated how hard it was to follow all the rules in the Bible. In fact, it’s impossible in our own strength.

I would be amiss on this Pentecost Sunday, not to mention God’s gift of the Spirit and his role in empowering us to live righteous lives. The apostle Paul writes, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin,he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3-4). It’s impossible to obey the Law in our own human strength, yet Christ has redeemed us and by his Spirit we are empowered to live in obedience to God.

Elsewhere Paul writes, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:13-16).

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