

Today's the day we've all been waiting for. The kick-in-our pants that we've needed. The chance to take our stale, forgotten resolutions and RECOMMIT. It's possible you may not have heard of this little-known, holiday (because I just made it up) but it's NEW New Year's Resolution Day!

That's right, February 12<sup>th</sup> is all about getting a second chance to make good on our new year's resolutions. And if your “new year, new you” mantra had anything to do with living like Jesus, you're in luck. Because the Sermon on the Mount is jam-packed with the Lord's teaching on how to live like him.

At the very end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:28 & 29 we read, “*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*”

William Barclay says, “It is difficult for us to realize just how shocking a thing this *authority* of Jesus must have seemed to the Jews who listened to him. To the Jews, the law was absolutely holy and absolutely divine; it is impossible to exaggerate the place that the law had in their reverence. The Jewish document *The Letter of Aristeeas* says: ‘The law is holy and has been given by God.’ ‘Only Moses’ decrees’, said Philo, ‘are everlasting, unchangeable and unshakable, as signed by nature herself with her seal.’ The Rabbis said: ‘Those who deny that the law is from heaven have no part in the world to come.’ They said: ‘Even if one says that the law is from God with the exception of this or that verse, which Moses, not God, spoke from his own mouth, then there applies to him the judgment. He has despised the word of the Lord: he has shown the irreverence which merits the destruction of the soul.’

The first act of every synagogue service was taking the scrolls of the law from the ark in which they were stored, and carrying them around the congregation, so that the congregation might show their reverence for them. That is what the Jews thought of the law; and now no fewer than four times (In verses 21, 27, 33, 38) Jesus quotes the law, only to contradict it and to substitute a teaching of his own.”

Followers of Jesus are not only to fulfill the Law but go beyond it. Here we see Jesus' honest attitude toward and his interpretation of the Torah. The Law is to be obeyed but in a deeper dimension than that of the scribes and Pharisees. The “higher righteousness” of his disciples involves not only external behavior, but internal motivation. God demands total obedience of the whole person. Back in verse 20 the moral righteousness is illustrated by the command, “*You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.*” Notice the NIV implies a motive for the act when it chooses the word “murder” over “kill.” It is not only the act but the anger that leads to the act that is involved. Then comes the higher righteousness in this sentence: “*But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.*” That puts Jesus in a superior position to Moses and the Torah.

Consider the Law. Since Jesus was condemned for breaking the Law of Moses and since we are saved by grace and not by the Law, we might conclude that Jesus was opposed to the Law. On the contrary, Jesus supports and upholds the Law. He does not break it but *fulfills* it. But Jesus goes beyond the Law to the spirit of love which is how the Law is fulfilled. Since love is the fulfilling of the Law, the Law serves as a basic guide for the Christian life.

The righteousness that “*surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law*” is what Jesus brought up in verse 20. The word “righteousness” has a twofold meaning. Its ethical meaning embraces virtue, goodness, and uprightness. The religious meaning goes a step further and indicates being rightly related to God and neighbor. The righteousness of God is God’s way of rightly relating us to him. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was an ethical righteousness which involved a strict keeping of the letter of the Law. The Christian has a righteousness that *exceeds* the ethical. It is a right relationship with God and with people. Anger is a symptom of a broken relationship, whereas forgiveness renews the relationship.

“*But I tell you...*” is the language Jesus uses in verses 22, 28, 32, 34. Who is the “I”? Who is presumptuous enough to go beyond what Moses said? Who does the “I” think he is—one greater than Moses, the mighty prophet of God? Here we confront Christological implications of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus is the one who is speaking. And here we find one greater than Moses. In the words, “*But I tell you,*” Jesus is placing himself above all other religious teachers and prophets. How can he rightfully do this? To begin with, Jesus speaks as God’s Son, the Word made flesh. He has the mind, the Spirit, and the essence of God the Father. As the Word of God incarnate, Jesus’ word is truth that exceeds all other teachers. Thus, the Scriptures testify to him and we interpret them in the light of Christ.

Jesus demands of his disciples a way of life superior to the professional religious people. He plainly says unless our righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, we cannot enter his kingdom. Who can surpass the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes are diligent scholars of the Bible: the Pharisees are “perfect” in their piety as they strictly observe every detail of the Law. Many Christians would be satisfied getting to the level of the scribes and Pharisees. What is this “higher righteousness,” and how do we get it lest we fail to enter the kingdom of God?

The ordinary goodness that Jesus speaks of is righteousness as morality. The Scribes observe all the orthodox doctrines of the Law. The Pharisees practice a pietism according to the letter of the Law. But the greater goodness that Jesus teaches is a righteousness that reflects being in a right relationship with God and with others.

As we all know, anger disrupts relationships. Those of us with a short fuse are very familiar with how this works. A seemingly harmless comment or an off the cuff observation is taken as a criticism, or an affront, that leads to angry words. But as Jesus describes it, forgiveness and reconciliation renews and strengthens our relationships.

For example, you have done something to offend a person. Jokingly we say that now we’re “in the doghouse.” How do we get out of the doghouse? Not until we get the matter settled peacefully will we be accepted back into our homes. Until then, we remain outside of the healthy circle of our family, friends and acquaintances that comprise our lives. In this passage Jesus is talking about the same kind of broken human relations. It is not a matter of proclaiming, “I have nothing against anybody else,” but another person may have something against you. You say, “Well, that’s your problem.” Though you may feel you have a clear conscience and go to worship, Jesus says, “Stop! Don’t come to God with your gift. Get reconciled with the one who is angry with you. Then come to God and your gift will be accepted.” How many folks, I wonder, come to church for forgiveness knowing that someone out there “hates their guts?”

Jesus' instructions are fairly clear. When someone has something against you: Realize you have hurt someone (v. 23). Settle accounts with the offended person (v. 24). Once you are reconciled, come into God's presence with your gift (v. 24). This is the "higher righteousness" that Jesus taught his followers to practice.

Jesus claimed the right to point out the inadequacies of the most sacred writings in the world, and to correct them out of his own wisdom. The Greeks defined *authority*, as 'the power to add and the power to take away at will.' Jesus claimed that kind of power with regard to that which the Jews believed to be the unchanging and unchangeable word of God. Jesus didn't argue about this, or seek in any way to justify himself for so doing, or seek to prove his right to do so. He calmly and without question assumed that right.

Barclay says, "No one had ever heard anything like this before. The great Jewish teachers had always had characteristic phrases in their teaching. The characteristic phrase of the prophet was: 'Thus says the Lord.' He claimed no personal authority at all; his only claim was that he spoke what God had told him. The characteristic phrase of the scribe and the Rabbi was: 'There is a teaching that...'. The scribe or the Rabbi never dared to express even an opinion of his own unless he could buttress it with supporting quotations from the great teachers of the past. But, to Jesus, a statement required no authority other than the fact that he made it. He was his own authority.

Clearly, one of two things must be true—either Jesus was crazy, or he was unique; either he was a megalomaniac, or else he was the Son of God. No ordinary person would dare to make such a claim, to take and overturn what up to that point had been regarded as the eternal word of God.

Orchestras that played under Toscanini, a supreme conductor, said that as soon as he mounted the rostrum they could feel a wave of authority flowing from him. Julian Duguid tells how he once crossed the Atlantic in the same ship as the physician and missionary Sir Wilfred Grenfell; and he says that when Grenfell came into one of the ship's public rooms, he could tell (without even looking round) that he had entered the room, for a wave of authority went out from the man. It was supremely so with Jesus."

Jesus took the highest human wisdom and corrected it, because he was who he was. He did not need to argue about it. It was sufficient for him to speak.

Remember everyone, this is NEW New Year's Resolution Day! No one can honestly listen to Jesus without feeling that this is God's last word beside which all other words are inadequate.

We have heard Jesus speak. The question is: How will we live? Amen.