



Increase – Not Decrease

Matthew 5:17-20

Rev. John Sowers

May 11, 2008

When we accept the grace of Christ, the grace that underlies the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, we eliminate the twin dangers of sinful self-righteousness and the paralyzing effects of self-imposed guilt.

Scripture

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of 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.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Sermon

A fascinating thing happens to Harry Potter as he goes from “muggle” to “wizard.” A word of explanation for those of you who are not Harry Potter fans. Actually, a pre-word of explanation for those of you who are not Harry Potter fans and believe the worst of the series: I’m not telling you what you have to believe, but I will tell you that I find these books to be as thematically Christian as I do the Lord of the Rings trilogy and nearly as thematically Christian as the Narnia books. And both of those series contain their share of magic.

Back to the word of explanation: A muggle in the Harry Potter world is a non-magical person. You and I are muggles, though I am hoping that that will not always be the case for me. Wizards and witches find out their status when they are eleven years old and are sent to be trained at Hogwarts, the wizards' school. Harry finds out that he is a wizard and makes his way to Hogwarts on the train with his fellow students. He meets Ron Weasley, who is the son of wizarding parents and Ron tries to bring Harry up to speed on the rules of the wizarding world. He even explains to Harry the rules of Quidditch, a game that is like soccer but played on flying broomsticks. Harry, on the outside of the wizarding world is confused and bored by these rules. That is, he is bored by them, until he enters Hogwarts and Quidditch takes on a new found reality. Watch this scene and we will learn the rules of Quidditch alongside Harry.

Until Harry entered this new world, the rules meant very little to him; they were distractions and carried little weight and were virtually beyond understanding. When he enters into this new world to which he is brought by invitation, the rules – for all things, not just for Quidditch – not only matter, he embraces them, and they become exciting reminders of the greatness of the community to which he belongs.

The law of God, outside of the Kingdom of God is hard to understand and impossible to obey. When faced with that law, those who live outside the Kingdom scoff at it, ignore it, or out of a vague sense that it has some value, try to live into it with bad results. The law becomes a source of frustration or of sinful pride for those who try to live into it and only partially succeed.

We have said as we have studied the Sermon on the Mount, that it is an expression of the values – the rules – of the Kingdom of God, given to us by Jesus Christ who is the Son of God. Up until this point, Jesus has told us that the Kingdom is a place that he invites all of us to live in, that to be invited into the Kingdom is to be blessed by Jesus. Furthermore, when we are inside the Kingdom, Jesus charges us to invite others in to join us – that is why we are called to be salt and light.

Now Jesus begins to unpack the values of the Kingdom, to tell us how we will live with each other in this place that is so different than the bland world, the “muggle” world, that we have lived in to this point. As he unpacks these values, he tells us that the rules that were given to the chosen people of God – who didn't always do such a good job with those rules, and were being particularly unwise with them during the time of Jesus – were very good rules and still applied to the new Kingdom that Jesus brought. As a matter of fact Jesus didn't come to lessen the rules but to complete them.

At first that can come to us as less than good news. I'm a guilty person by nature. I see a cop car and I automatically begin to pull over. I see my former professors here and I want to tell them that I'm pretty sure that I will do better on my next test. So when Jesus tells me that he is in favor of the law, that not only does he want to keep it, he wants to increase it, what gets increased for me is my guilt.

The other way we can misinterpret this call from Jesus about the law, is to think that Jesus is now calling us to greater “sin-management” in our lives. We view the law as ours to keep; we view the obedience to the law as something that we can summon on our own through a huge outlay of will. The sin of that sin-management is the sin of believing that we have the power and the ability to determine our own righteousness. This is the sin of the Pharisee – the Pharisees of the time of Jesus and the Pharisees now. It is this sin of seeking your own righteousness under the law and refusing to submit to the righteousness that Jesus imputes from his grace – the only true righteousness – which Jesus will condemn over and over again in this sermon and in the whole of his earthly ministry.

When we accept the grace of Christ, the grace that underlies the whole of the Sermon of the Mount, we eliminate the twin dangers of sinful self-righteousness and the paralyzing effects of self-imposed guilt.

The increase of guilt is not the intent of Jesus and his approach to the law. And obviously from that we read in the Gospels Jesus stands against self-righteousness. What he wants from the law are the boundaries for our lives so that we can live into the joy of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Christ is that place where joy replaces anger, fidelity replaces lust, love replaces enmity, forgiveness trades out for frustration, and we all get our daily bread. We live within the bounds of the rules and that brings the peace and grace of Christ into his Kingdom.

In Psalm 23 we say of the shepherd’s rod and staff, that “they comfort us.” In Proverbs we claim that to spare the rod spoils the child. That rod is the same in both places. It is not primarily an instrument of punishment; it is the instrument of guidance. It is a staff that keeps the boundaries along the pathway, so that as we good sheep keep moving forward to the goal of the sheepfold, we will not get lost or injured along the way. The law – God’s law – is the rod of our collective lives. As we move along together as Christ’s sheep, Christ the Good Shepherd keeps us moving toward the Kingdom-fold by guiding us with the rod of the law. And because Jesus wields the rod, it works and it is an instrument of help and not of harm, an instrument of grace and not of guilt.

One last metaphor to lift up and to alter this morning: Many people have read this passage and Jesus’ exhortations of values that follow as the equivalent of your momma telling you that you have to eat your vegetables but if you do you will get dessert. So you hold your nose and you eat your broccoli because you know there is pie later if you do. Jesus tells us to fulfill the law, the law doesn’t taste good but if we eat it we’ll get the Kingdom of Heaven later on.

We have been asserting though that the Kingdom of Heaven is here right now. It is immediately available to us. And Jesus is saying that law is not a distasteful vegetable to be endured for the moment until something better comes along, he is saying that the law is the flavor of the Kingdom, and that through his grace we are empowered to not only eat it but to enjoy it, to relish it. And we treat the law in its proper Kingdom context which means that through Jesus is no longer an instrument of guilt and self-righteousness but it becomes a gift of grace and right living.