

LAW AND GRACE IN THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

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I. INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul wrote, “You are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14). When Jesus reigns, He will fully enforce the Law. Does this fact contradict Paul’s statement? If not, how do both these truths fit together?

II. LAW IN THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

Someone may wish to question the statement that the Lord Jesus Christ will fully enforce the Law in His kingdom. But this is what Jesus said so very plainly in the Sermon on the Mount. Matt 5:17-19 reads:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is saying that if there is someone *in the kingdom of heaven* who breaks a very small command of the Law and teaches others to do it, that person will have the lowest possible standing *in the kingdom*. This is certainly the most natural and straightforward way to read this passage.

Jesus’ large audience would have understood Him to be referring to the future messianic kingdom which the nation expected. They would not be likely to theologize this statement in some way, as modern readers are tempted to do. The obvious idea is that this is how it will be *in the kingdom*.

Furthermore, the reference to heaven and earth not passing away until the Law and Prophets are fulfilled supports this understanding. According to the Book of Revelation, heaven and earth do not pass away until the first thousand years have run their course. Jesus is therefore thinking of the end of the first thousand years of His kingdom as being the terminal point for this fulfillment. The Law *will have been* fulfilled when the old heaven and earth are burned up.

We know that before heaven and earth pass away, there will be law-breaking in the kingdom. For example, an uncountable multitude of people alive on the earth will participate in the rebellion of Gog and Magog (Rev 20:7-10). Zechariah 14:16-19 tells us a lot about the status of the Jewish Law in the messianic kingdom.

And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, on them there shall be no rain. And if the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the Lord strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.

Keeping the Feast of Tabernacles involves obedience to a major command of the Law. Furthermore this requirement is not simply imposed only on the Jewish nation in the kingdom. It is required of all nations. Breaking this command, therefore, results in a major penalty, which consists of drought and plague.

By contrast, in the words of Jesus, the person who breaks a very small commandment and teaches others to do the same is merely reduced in status in the kingdom. This is a relatively light punishment compared to what happens, for example, if Egypt refuses to attend Tabernacles.

Obviously the idea of retribution for infractions of the Law of Moses in the first thousand years is clear and unequivocal in the Zechariah passage. The kingdom will inaugurate a time that is unparalleled in human history. Every command of the Law will be enforced in the kingdom, and there is no command that will be completely ignored. Thus, for the first time ever, many will be obedient to every requirement of the Law of

Moses. In that sense the Law will be fulfilled before heaven and earth pass away.

III. DESTROYING THE LAW

The statement made by Jesus in Matt 5:12 has caused trouble for some. Jesus says, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.”

The Sermon on the Mount was very early in the ministry of Jesus. Apparently the Sermon was preached not long after the imprisonment of John the Baptist, which is noted in Matt 4:12. The execution of John is not recorded until chapter 14.

At such an early stage of His ministry, why should anyone have the idea that Jesus intended to destroy the Law and the Prophets? Clearly some people were teaching this, for Jesus tells them here to not believe it. What had Jesus said or done to lead them to this conclusion?

Before the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus had already begun to evangelize. This is evident from the statements made in John 3:24 and 4:1-4:

For John had not yet been thrown into prison (John 3:24).

Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John did (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again into Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria (John 4:1).

These statements show that the discourse with Nicodemus and the conversation with the Samaritan woman took place *before* Jesus had preached the Sermon on the Mount. In addition, before the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus had been in Jerusalem at the Passover. There “many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did” (John 2:23).

Therefore, by the time of the Sermon on the Mount, the gospel Jesus preached had been plainly declared by Him. But His message was contrary to the normative expectations of religiously inclined Jewish people. Jesus did not say a word about a person needing to observe the Law or the Prophets in order to have everlasting life.

This must have bothered a lot of strict religious Jews. Jesus sounded to them like an antinomian who was out to destroy the Law and the Prophets.

If no one was thinking this, why would Jesus need to say: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets.” To the contrary, Jesus says, “Don’t think that.” And then He adds (and again I paraphrase): “I intend to preside over the complete fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in My kingdom.” Jesus insists on the full integrity of the Law.

IV. THE LAW ENFORCED IN DEPTH

The Law will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom by the enforcement of every one of its commands, however small and seemingly unimportant, but that is not all. It will also be enforced in depth. That is to say, the enforcement will not just be in terms of the letter of the Law. The Law will be enforced in terms of its in-depth implications.

Jesus superbly illustrates the in-depth enforcement of the Law in Matt 5:21-22:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire.”

There will never have been a time or place in human history like this. If a person gets mad at his *brother* without good reason, he will be prosecuted for it. Or if he says to him, “Raca” (“You idiot”), it is possible he will go before a jury.

However, this is the future King speaking. He is still talking about how things will be in His kingdom.

The OT Law forbade murder. Behind murder there almost always lies some form of anger. In the millennial kingdom, judgment will not be executed on murder alone, but on anger itself, thus fulfilling the implications of the Law.

If a citizen of the kingdom expresses unjustifiable anger against a fellow citizen he will be *in danger of the judgment*. The words *in danger of* translate the Greek word *enochos* and this word can be rendered *answerable to*. A court hearing is implied in which the citizen would be convicted of a misdemeanor.

If the anger is expressed in an insulting way, so that a person calls his fellow citizen something like an “idiot,” that person is answerable to “the council,” a functional equivalent of a jury, where the offense is a felony.

If the verbal abuse rises to the level of “You fool,” the offense is punishable by banishment to Gehenna for a capital offense.

Bear in mind that at His Second Coming, the King will banish the Beast and the False Prophet—still alive—into the lake of fire (Rev 19:20). It follows that anyone else in His kingdom can be banished to the same place if the King commands it.

The word *enochos* is used for all three cases that Jesus is illustrating. This implies that some flexibility may be used in assessing these penalties. That does not affect the obvious point. Jesus is describing a strict enforcement of the Law that is far above and beyond anything mankind has ever known before.

Jesus is not talking about glorified people in the kingdom. They, of course, will be unable to sin in any way. He is talking about the type of ordinary person who might be among the many that will participate in the rebellion of Gog and Magog.

In fact, after a thousand years of the kind of government our Lord describes, the world will be ripe for a revolt. When Satan is released from the Abyss at the end of the Millennium, is it any wonder that he will find a large response to his call for rebellion? Millions of people will be only too ready to overthrow this unbearably strict King. They will no longer wish to be ruled with a rod of iron (Ps 2:9; Rev 2:26-27)!

V. ESTABLISHING THE LAW

In Rom 3:31, Paul echoes what Jesus taught in Matt 5:17-19. He writes that faith establishes the Law. To suggest that righteousness or eternal salvation can occur on anything less than a perfect fulfillment of the Law, is to subvert the unity, the integrity and the seriousness of the Law. However, if no one can fulfill the whole Law, righteousness must come by faith. Faith validates the integrity of the entire Law.

This idea is also clearly expressed by James when he writes in Jas 2:10: “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”

To put it very simply, you are either a law-keeper or a lawbreaker. You don’t have to break every statute in the state of Texas to go to jail. Do you have any idea how many prisoners in Texas jails might say to

you, “I just made *one* mistake”? So what? “Just one mistake” can be good for life in prison.

If God’s Law is to have full integrity and be taken with full seriousness, we cannot say of even the smallest command, “Oh well, that command doesn’t matter very much!”

If a person in the kingdom of heaven ignores even the smallest commandments and teaches others to do the same, he deserves to be relegated to the bottom of the societal ladder.

If the kingdom honors the Law down to its smallest requirement, then it follows that no ordinary righteousness can be adequate for entrance into that kingdom. In fact, that is what Jesus affirms when he says in Matt 5:20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The scribes and Pharisees were at that time the arbiters of the Law in its strictest form. They insisted on its strict observance and they were punctilious in observing it. To all appearances they were paragons of righteousness in Israel. (Jesus had not yet begun to excoriate them for their hypocrisy.)

Jesus affirms even their righteousness is inadequate for entrance into the super-strict realm of His future kingdom. The ordinary hearer of the Sermon on the Mount might well despair when he heard this statement.

And that was just the point. If His audience thought in terms of a works-righteousness obtained by keeping the Law, their case was hopeless. That hopelessness, in fact, was precisely what the Law was designed to produce in people. Paul makes this clear to us in Rom 3:20 when he writes: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Having said this, he proceeds to write in Rom 3:21-22: “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.”

Obviously it is *that* righteousness, and only that righteousness, to which Jesus is referring to in Matt 5:20. When He speaks of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees He is talking about a *perfect* righteousness. It is exactly such a righteousness that is imputed to the believer in Jesus. This alone is adequate for entrance into God’s kingdom. In fact, it is adequate precisely because it is the very righteousness of God Himself.

If man contemplates entrance into the kingdom on the basis of some form of imperfect righteousness, he demeans the Law. To think and teach like that is to subvert the Law and to degrade its seriousness and integrity.

Neither Jesus Himself nor Paul ever did that.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Sermon is contained in Matthew 5–7 and can be read in less than thirty minutes. It is obviously greatly condensed by Matthew. Given the large audience (Matt 5:1), it is likely that in its original form it took a couple of hours. Matthew has condensed it for his Christian readership and he has no need to spell out what righteousness Jesus was referring to. In his day—if not in ours—Christians knew what this righteousness must be. In the Sermon on the Mount, did Jesus ever explain what righteousness He was talking about in Matt 5:20? There is no way to know.

If Jesus did *not* explain what this righteousness was, then His Sermon is a masterpiece of pre-evangelism. Using the Law for the very purpose God intended, Jesus' affirmation of its complete integrity could only serve to bring deep conviction of sin to his unregenerate hearers.

If, as I suspect (based on 7:13-14), Jesus *did* explain this righteousness toward the end of the Sermon, then His message served as a powerful evangelistic tool. Either way, Jesus was fishing for men.

Matthew's presentation for his Christian audience is very effective as well. We, like the disciples mentioned in 5:1, are sitting at Jesus' feet to learn something about the righteousness of His future kingdom. And having seen its superlative standards of holiness, we can aim for these in our present Christian life.

After all, didn't Paul write in Rom 8:3-4:

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

Even this goal does not place us under the Law. Yet, contrary to the opinion of many, the Law has not been done away with. Jesus did not come to destroy it. Instead, as believers who have been united with

Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, we have passed *out of the sphere* to which the Law applies.

Mark this well; removal from the Law's sphere affects only those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ. Thereby they have been co-crucified with Christ and raised to live a resurrection life in Him. Paul says this plainly in Gal 2:19-20:

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for Me.

This is the true status of all who are a part of the Body of Christ. Just as soon as the Church is removed by the Rapture, the Law will again be in force for God's people. First it will be in force for the believing Jews of the Tribulation period, as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 24. After His kingdom is established, it will be in force for the whole world.

And in the kingdom, as the Law is enforced in all its details, men will be able to learn the lesson it was always intended to convey: "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20).

Those who learn this lesson in the kingdom will have the opportunity to believe in the King for eternal life. Those who do not learn it will be candidates for the rebellion of Gog and Magog.