
Jesus and the Oral Law

by: Ronald L. Dart

It is easily the best known of all the discourses that Jesus ever gave, it is the Sermon on the Mount. It is probably well known because every beginning preacher is encouraged by his mentor to speak about the Sermon on the Mount. It is bread-and-butter for beginning preachers.

So even if you don't read the Bible very much, you still probably have heard the phrase, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

The Sermon on the Mount is a memorable work, it has that beginning with the poetic Beatitudes that lock into the mind. Each of those could be a subject for a much longer exposition. "Blessed are the meek," for example, could make a strong theme for a full sermon.

In fact, I'm not at all for sure that the Sermon on the Mount, as we read it, was much longer than it is in exposition or in the written record of it, for the simple reason, that they couldn't get it all down. Jesus probably spoke longer than that.

Early on in that discourse, on that day, there is a statement that challenges the very structure of some Christian doctrine and I am afraid an awful lot of people sail right over it without paying any attention to it

Don't Think This

Jesus said plainly, "Don't think this," and surprisingly an awful lot Christian people think that way anyhow. Here it is, in Jesus' own words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law, or the prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them, I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law, until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18).

Now there are two criteria here that have to be in place for a comma, or the crossing of a 'T' to pass from the law.

One, heaven and earth have to disappear. As I record this program, I can look out the window, and they are still here.

Number two, everything has to be accomplished. There's a very large array of things that God has said that He will do that haven't rolled around yet, so we are still waiting.

Now this poses a huge problem for anyone who is aware of the contents of the law that Jesus is talking about. I am going to have to explain what I mean. There's no problem with the better-known Commandments in the Law – "Thou shalt not steal," for example. I don't know of a single soul in all of Christendom who believes it's okay with God for us to steal.

Try This Law On For Size

But try this law on for size. It comes from Leviticus the 19th chapter and verse 19, "You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your livestock breed with a another kind: you shall not sow your field with mixed seed: nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you." Now what should a person think about this law?

Does it for example outlaw, effectively, a wool and Dacron suit? I heard of one fellow who read this and promptly cut the elastic out of the top of his socks. Now common sense should tell us that there's something wrong with this picture, but what is it? Besides the fact that his socks were down around his ankles all the time.

Has The Fourth Commandment Been Abolished?

Now there have been some ingenious interpretations of this statement by Jesus about the permanence of the law. One denomination, for example, asserts that the Ten Commandments were all abolished, but nine of them were reinstated in the New Testament. The missing commandment, they say, is the command to keep the Sabbath. Now this is problematic for several reasons. One, the Sabbath is plainly in effect in the New Testament. My book titled "The thread, God's Appointments with History" (available from Amazon.com) argues effectively that the Sabbath was observed throughout the New Testament period. The New Testament nowhere lays out a new set of commandments for us to keep, it assumes existing laws and affirms it at every important point.

Then there is this in Jesus' statement, let me read it again to you, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law, until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18).

Jesus Plainly Said He Was Not Going to Abrogate the Law

Now this hangs the whole argument out to dry. It is hard to make a convincing argument that Jesus abolished the law when He plainly said He was not going to do it, but this doesn't get us any closer to understanding what Jesus actually meant. We intuitively know that many of the laws in the Bible simply cannot be observed in the modern world. (The Jews say that there are 613 laws in the Old Testament). And yet here is Jesus saying plainly, "I am not going to abrogate the law."

Categorize the Law

Another approach that has been taken is to categorize the law. Thomas Aquinas, a Catholic theologian, distinguished the moral, ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Old Law, thus dividing the Law into three categories. Some hold that only the Oral Law persists while the ceremonial and the judicial laws passed away or were changed. But here's the problem with that, the Scriptures don't make that distinction, and if they did, you still have to ask, What law was Jesus talking about? Do you remember what He said, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law." Jesus said nothing about the Oral Law, or the ceremonial law or the judicial law. He drew no distinction about what law He was talking about. He just said, "the law."

The Law of Moses Existed in Two Forms, Written and Oral

Now wait a moment, that's not strictly speaking true. There is a distinction here which you and I could easily have missed. I missed it for a long time.

Now listen carefully again for the distinction which is right there for you to hear, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law, until everything is accomplished."

Now if a person knows little or nothing about the culture of the times, he may not realize the significance of what Jesus said. Those listening to Him at the time would have grasped it immediately.

In the mind of the Jews, the law of God or the law of Moses, if you will, existed in two forms, written and oral.

The Oral Law

The idea of Oral Law is extremely important in Judaism. You don't find that term in the New Testament but you do find the Oral Law talked about. In the New Testament, it is called "The traditions of the elders," which helps us to understand what it was

Among some Jews there is a belief that God gave Moses both the written and the Oral Law. The Oral Law was passed on orally. Among those Jews there was a great reverence for the Oral Law because they think the Oral Law came down from God just like the Written Law did. But in fact, the Oral Law, so-called, is nothing more than the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish people. It is the accumulated, the whole package, of all their judgments about the law down through time. Now while it has great value in terms of commentary, in terms of tradition, and in terms of establishing meanings of things, it certainly does not carry the weight of the Written Law.

By the time Jesus showed up on the scene, they had quite an accumulation of traditions that compromised the Written Law.

Jesus Affirmed the Written Law

Now let's consider one more time what Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law." Jesus is affirming the Written Law as opposed to the Oral Law, so there is a distinction in law recognized here. Now it is important that He makes this clear at the outset because He is about to do serious damage to the traditions of the elders, otherwise known as the Oral Law.

Remember, Jesus in the eyes of the people was a Rabbi. They were used to rabbis differing on matters small and great. Rabbis could have some really fascinating debates and did over long periods of time.

Jesus then is about to take a position in a familiar debate, so not wanting to be misunderstood, He affirms the Written Law and proceeds then to trash the current edition of the Oral Law. Right here we put our finger on the one distinction in the law that is going to be relevant right through everything that Jesus says and even in the writings of Paul.

The New Testament has nothing to say about the Oral Law, ceremonial law or judicial law as distinctions in the law. It has much to say about the Written Law versus tradition. Paul had no argument with the Written Law, his beef was with Judaism as such

Clarification Relative To Judaism

I need to clarify a few things relative to Judaism. First, what Judaism is not. It is not the religion of the Old Testament. It was not the religion of Abraham. It wasn't even the religion of Judah himself. I don't recall seeing a name for the faith in the Old Testament now that I think about it, it is just simply, the faith. It doesn't need a name.

The bottom line is this, before the house of Judah was destroyed and the people carried away, there was no religion called Judaism. So what is Judaism? Judaism as such grew out of the period of Persia and it was a dominant force in the Middle East. It was the Persian kings who allowed the Jews to return home and establish themselves once again in Jerusalem. Not very much is known about Jewish life in this period.

Adin Steinsalz, in his book, "The Essential Talmud," introduces us to an idea called the Great Assembly. He says "The exact nature of the Great Assembly is unclear, it may have been a permanent institution with legislative and executive powers or merely a generic name for all the scholars of a given period."

"In fact with few exceptions the names of the sages, the outstanding personalities of that Persian age are unknown. The same cloud of obscurity envelops the activities of the members of the Great Assembly and nothing is known of their conduct or methods."

"Culturally and spiritually speaking this period was the decisive one in the annals of the Jewish people. It gave Judaism its unique and well-defined spiritual framework which has survived despite changes and modifications throughout the centuries in the holy land and the Diaspora."

I think the Great Assembly probably traced its function to the original 70 elders appointed by Moses to render judgments about the law. They formed kind of a Supreme Court, a judiciary, where decisions could be made about how we are going to keep this law.

It would've been the precursor of the Sanhedrin of the first century. Nicodemus who came surreptitiously to see Jesus, is called an archon, a ruler of the Jews. I presume he was a member of that august body, the Sanhedrin.

Canonization Of The Bible

Adin Steinsalz goes on to say this, "The members of the Great Assembly actually collected holy writings, decided which books would be canonized in the Bible, which chapters of each book should be selected and gave the Bible its definitive form and style."

"The completion of the Bible, one of the greatest projects of the Great Assembly, also marked the beginning of the reign of the Oral Law. You can see what a crucial period of time this was, because this body of men, were men of God, men who serve God and of which two were Ezra and Nehemiah, who collected holy writings together, examined them carefully, prayed over them, studied them and decided, no this doesn't belong in here and yes this does. They put together what we today call the Old Testament."

Now by the time Jesus came on the scene, there were two political parties who divided along this fault line and who struggled for influence among the people. On the one hand were the Pharisees who believed that the Oral Law was of divine origin and carried authority equal to that of the Written Law. When one speaks of Jewish law, one is generally speaking of the Oral Law, which had long since been committed to writing, so it's not exactly oral any longer.

On the other hand there were the Sadducees who rejected the authority of the Oral Law. They did not believe that it came down from God on Mount Sinai. They believed it came from Jews of previous generations.

I don't know if the Sadducees rejected the Oral Law out of hand or merely refused to use it for making rulings which some Jews today feel that they cannot use it for making rulings

Sermon on the Mount

Now with this background we can return to the Sermon on the Mount and see what we can make of what Jesus had to say. Jesus said in Matthew 5 and verse 17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law, or the prophets: I am not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. {18} I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law, until everything is accomplished."

Now its easy to see here that Jesus is establishing common ground and heading off an accusation that might come His way. He affirms the Written Law and He makes no such affirmation of the Oral Law. In fact, He is about to issue a serious challenge to some aspects of the Oral Law.

Jesus said, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of any of these Commandments and teaches others to do the same shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Now keep in mind, these commands that He is talking about, have to do with the ones that were written down by Moses.

How Do We Enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you're not going to enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20) Now this is a really odd thing to say, how would one's righteousness exceed that of these very righteous men. Well, they had corrupted the law in important ways in that they had departed from the original intent of the Written Law.

Now there are so many things in Jesus' teaching that I don't have time to go into today.

We need to understand this, that in the course of developing their rules, their regulations, and interpreting all of their decisions that they made about the law, in some cases they all but set aside the written Commandments of God.

In building a fence around the law and drawing hard lines on certain issues, they left room where a person could break the original intent of the law, in the process of obeying their rulings on the law.

Now Jesus is ready to go beyond this and explain what it is that He means. We have come to Matthew 5 and verse 21, and Jesus says this, "You've heard it was said of the people long ago, do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." Now this is a formula that Jesus will use again and again. He said, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago." Note, not that it was written, it was said. This is an important distinction. It is the one distinction in the law that you find in the New Testament between what was written and what was spoken.

Tradition

There was a tradition among some that the Oral Law was actually spoken by God to Moses. No, Moses said plainly, he wrote down every thing that God told him (Exodus 24:4). So Jesus is saying, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago. It was the very old Oral Law that He's talking about.

Now note this, "Do not murder," is in the Written Law. The section that says that "anyone who murders will be subject to judgment" is not. But the whole law is true. What was wrong with the statement was, it didn't go far enough. By making this a ruling they implied if you just don't kill anybody you are righteous.

Jesus went further. He said, "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Again "If anyone says to his brother 'Raca' is answerable to the Sanhedrin but anyone who says 'you fool' shall be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22). Now what is

He talking about here? You got a ruling, He said. Then, "If someone who said to his brother Raca is going to have to answer to the Sanhedrin." Jesus said, "I think it is more serious than that, anyone who says you fool will be in danger from the fire of hell."

Textual Problem

Now there is a textual problem in this verse. The King James Version has, "Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgment." The "without a cause" is in some manuscripts and not in other manuscripts. So the modern translations omit it. The expression "without a cause" is the Geek word for idly. He who is angry with his brother idly, or without just reason. It implies that merely to be angry with your brother for a just cause does not necessarily make one guilty. The other expression "Raca" and "You fool" are like shouting "you jerk" or "moron" at your brother. Now why is that so bad? The reason that it is so bad is that it is provocative. It could lead to blows and could even result in murder. It is not so hard to see how telling a man to his face that he is a moron could get your nose punched.

What Jesus is saying is this, you can't skate by the edge of this law and stay blameless.

Skate Right To The Edge

Jesus is saying, you can't establish your own set of laws, your own set of rules and then skate right to the edge of those and stay blameless. Now it may occur to you that this could be just as true with the Written Law as it would be with the Oral Law but it is not exactly right. What the Jewish establishment was doing was creating a comprehensive set of laws that had nothing to do with the heart and with the attitude. They didn't address that. They addressed only external conduct. They were effectively creating a new law, and in fact their new law would eventually be written down in the Talmud. If you obeyed the letter of the law, you're okay.

Internalize God's Law

Now Jesus sees no need for any additional man-made rules. What he wants to see is the original intent of the law internalized, written on the heart. God with His own finger wrote the Ten Commandments on tables of stone but it was His intent in His new covenant with His people to write them in their hearts and in their minds so that the obedience to God arises out of a heart that turns toward him.

What Was The Original Intent of This Law?

Now Jesus isn't through with this. In Matthew 5 and in verse 27 He said, "You have heard that it was said do not commit adultery," so the assumption seems to be if I just don't get in bed with somebody else's wife, I'm all right. No, Jesus said, "I tell you, anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." So here's what we are dealing with, we're dealing with a law written on tables of stone that we are supposed to look at and ask ourselves, What was the original intent of this law? What is God trying to accomplish? What does He expect of me in this? We must understand that it is just as wrong for me to look at a woman, to commit adultery with her in my fantasies, as it is to actually go out and do it!

Gouge Out Your Eye?

Then Jesus said one of His really astonishing statements, He said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away, it is better for you to lose part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." What? Gouge out your eye? What does He mean? He goes on to say, "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

When you think about this for a moment, when has your right hand ever caused you to do something that you didn't want to do? Well, of course not, it is not possible. It is not your eye that causes the problem, it is not your hand that causes the problem, it's you, that is the problem.

What was Jesus Driving At?

So what was Jesus driving at here? What He is saying is that whatever it is in your life, whatever it is that hangs around you as a person, that you stumble over continually, that is a problem for you all the time, then cut it off, cut it out, get it away from you so that you don't skate next to the edge of breaking one of God's laws. If you see something that is taking you in that direction, get rid of it.

What Is A Practical Application?

What is a practical application? I'm not going to try to make a rule for you here. I'm only going to illustrate what I'm talking about.

If you, as a man have a subscription to Playboy magazine, and it causes you to sin, canceled it. Cut it off. Don't allow it to come into your house. How hard is that? This is what Jesus is driving at!

You put these laws in your heart and into your mind and you live by them. You make your own decisions. You don't have to consult the Pharisees or the Sadducees or anyone else to see their interpretations of the law, for after all, the only person whose interpretations of the law that should matter at all to you, are the interpretations of Jesus.

One more before we close. Jesus said, "It has been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce, but I'm going to tell you, that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Wow! This is really strong stuff. And it cuts right across the defining sin of our age.

Jesus is underlining and supporting the law that protects the family. Why is it this way? It's for the children.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think God intended for there to be a written law and an oral law?
2. Is the fact that this 'oral law' existed one of the reasons some people think Jesus did away with the law when he corrected the Pharisees and Sadducees?
3. Does society also confuse themselves by forgetting that Judah was one tribe out of twelve, and not all Hebrews were Jews?
4. What laws did Jesus condemn the Jews of His day that actually were not in the written law?
5. Have you ever paid attention to the fact that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus states, "You have heard" instead of, "it was written long ago?"
6. Does this fact actually point out that Jesus was making a distinction between God's law, which was written, and the Oral law that the Jews created? Remember, as Mr. Dart pointed out, Moses stated he wrote everything down that God told him (Exodus 24:4).
7. What does it mean to you that Jesus was trying to point out that keeping God's Law is a heart thing?
8. Have you noticed that this was not a new concept that God always intended His laws to be written on our hearts?
9. What is the difference between keeping the letter of the Law verses being better than the Pharisees and Sadducees in following the Law?
10. Do we today have issues with not keeping the Law with our hearts and minds?