
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES LAW MAKE?

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By Jim Jordal

"Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill. For most assuredly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished. Whoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 5:17-20, WEB

In this passage Jesus is pretty tough on believers who follow him but ignore what he came to complete---the law of Moses and the prophets. Some people back then evidently believed that to follow Jesus was to annul the law. There are similar beliefs today. They often describe themselves as "New Testament Christians" because their foundational beliefs come from the gospels and the teachings of the apostle Paul. But this view too often ignores and devalues the moral and ethical teachings and principles for national behavior found in the Old Testament.

For many Christians today the law is an anachronism relegated to the long-dead pages of ancient history. Yes, they still honor the Ten Commandments, but that's about the only law they consider seriously. The "great things of the law" become lost to them as they struggle to pattern their lives around doctrinal correctness, personal piety, and sexual purity. But good as they may be, these virtues are not enough.

Jesus considered failure to believe and practice the law (not the ceremonial and sacrificial ordinances, but the laws concerning national righteousness and justice) to be sufficient cause to separate even believers from entry into his earthly kingdom (see Matt. 7:21-23). Prophesying, casting out demons, and doing great acts in his name were not enough if they also "did iniquity," or "practiced lawlessness," as another translation puts it.

Practicing lawlessness means ignoring God's clear rules for personal and national righteousness, justice and mercy. As Micah put it: "What does the Lord require of you, Oh man, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Lord your God" (Micah 6:6-8). No amount of posturing around the performance of great deeds or the protestations of strong faith will cover failure to follow righteousness, justice and mercy as God's kingdom draws near.

Failing to act on these commandments and teaching others to do so results in a lower place in the kingdom of Christ. Acting on the commands and teaching others to do so results in a higher place in the kingdom. Notice it's not talking of a loss of personal salvation, but of a lower order of service in the Kingdom of God on Earth. Salvation in the spiritual sense depends upon faith, not works. But scripture in many places relates that we will at some future time be judged upon our works, and that the outcome of this judgment is not assignment to heaven or hell, but to a lesser role in the future kingdom.

Why was Jesus so adamant about this? Because that's the essence of his person and his message: the coming of righteousness, justice and mercy in his person and in his coming kingdom. It's all subsumed in the great commandments to love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Love expressed in deliverance from suffering and death is the heart and soul of Jesus's message. The driving force is his commands, with the Mosaic code identifying and specifying exactly what God has in mind for society, economics, government, and interpersonal relationships in his kingdom.

In the final sentence of the top passage, Jesus says that the righteousness of his followers must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if they wished to enter the kingdom of God in any capacity. Jesus is so hard on the Pharisees because they were heirs to the law, the prophets and the kingdom of God. But their intransigent legalism and worship rituals literally made the word of God of no effect. They postured righteousness in their religious practices but at the same time foreclosed on widows and orphans and urged their followers to do the same. They were the diametrical opposite of what Jesus wanted, so their place in his kingdom is denied unless they repent, which a few did, but most did not.

The Law of Moses will finally be fulfilled by the New Covenant that promises new hearts for God's people to replace their hearts of stone (see Hebrews 8). Until then, let's remember that the laws of God for righteousness, justice and mercy are still in effect and should provide a model vital to the success of society.