

**THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
THINK AGAIN! PART 1**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In an 1897 issue of *The Daily Argus News* in Crawfordsville, Indiana, a political observer apparently commented on a recent election with these words: “Having elected him, republicans think they have some voice in the distribution of the spoils, and there is where they have another think coming to them.” That is one of the earliest recorded American usages of a phrase that has morphed into “they have another thing coming.” But, “to have another think coming” is to realize your expectations are wrong and unreasonable and that you’d better think again. And, if you think again about an opinion or an action or a decision and consider it very carefully, you may well change your mind and decide to do things differently.

That leads to my somewhat looser translation of Matthew 5:17, but I think the spirit is the same: Jesus said, “If you think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, you have another think coming to you. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Think again!”

For that matter, if you think God’s law is just an ancient collection of “Thou shalt nots . . .,” you have another think coming to you. Think again!

If you think the problem with keeping God’s law lies with the law and not with the people don’t or won’t keep God’s law, you have another think coming to you. Think again!

If you think God gave God’s people the law to burden them and make their lives hard and set a goal that is impossible to keep, you have another think coming to you. Think again!

And, on the other side of the coin, to loosely translate today’s epistle lesson from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia, “If you think being free in Christ means you are free to do anything and everything you want, you have another think coming to you. Think again!”

Several sources I read this week described these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as some of the most difficult verses in the entire New Testament. I have to agree with those writers, so much so that at one point this week, I found myself wondering why I had chosen to preach on Matthew 5:17-20! But the more I thought about what Jesus teaches here, the more I realized that his hard words give us a golden opportunity to think again about God’s law and our relationship with God and with our neighbors. After all, that’s what the quintessential “Law of God,” the Ten Commandments, is all about. And, according to Jesus, that is what the greatest commandment is all about – loving God and loving neighbor.

Just as Jesus taught in the negative in last week's gospel lesson – “If salt has lost its saltiness, how can it be restored? No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel” -- it might be helpful to think about what God's law **is not** intended to be. On Sunday, July 11, the Alternative Sunday School Class will begin a new study of a book called *Lies My Preacher Told Me*. Pretty catchy title, huh? The subtitle is *An Honest Look at the Old Testament*. Since Jesus refers to what we tend to call the “Old Testament Law” so much in his Sermon on the Mount, I figured there had to be something in this book about God's law and our Christian lives.

Sure enough, Chapter 9 (or, as the author calls his chapters, “Mistruth 9”) is titled “The Old Testament Law is Nothing but a Burden, Impossible to Keep.” In fact, he even quotes today's gospel lesson in full as he helps us think again about how God's law or Torah (the first five books of what we call the Old Testament) is full of stories and poems as well as legal prescriptions, all of which give us a window into the kind of life God desires for and expects of his people. The author writes, “In the Old Testament, of course, it is none other than God who gives the Law to Israel. It seems unfair, to say the very least, of God to impose a burden on God's people – something that God knows full well is impossible to keep. In point of fact, the Pentateuch [Genesis – Deuteronomy] *never* presents the Law as something designed to frustrate the people; quite to the contrary, it is part of the covenant relationship that Israel willingly enters into in grateful response to the prior gracious salvation of God, experienced in the exodus from Egypt.”

Fast forward to Jesus' day . . . and then another 2,000 years to June 20, 2021. If you think following God's law perfectly is how you're going to be saved, then you have another think coming to you. Think again! If we think about God's law that way, inevitably one of three things happens: Either we think we have to or can ever earn God's love and salvation . . . or we despair of ever being able to do enough to earn God's love . . . or (I think more common), we end up sounding like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who stood in the temple and prayed to God, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” (Luke 18:11-12) It's a slippery slope that leads from living according to God's righteousness to living a self-righteous life.

Here's a helpful way to think about what it means to live according to God's law – God's **whole law**. If the first thing that comes to mind when you hear “God's law” is the Ten Commandments, think again about when and where God gave his people the commandments and why God gave his people the commandments. The first thing God did was hear his people cry out from Egypt and deliver them from slavery. **Then** God made a covenant with them to be their God and for them to be God's people. **Then** God gave God's people the commandments. It's almost as if the people said, “Wow! Thanks, God. What does it mean to be God's people? How are we supposed to do that?” and God answered, “I'm so glad you asked. Here, let me tell you what I expect out of you as my people . . .” This is how the author of *Lies My Preacher Told Me* describes the same thing, “The Law is thus a measure of grateful obedience offered back to a gracious God. In this way the Law is a means – a *divinely given* means – to maintain the relationship with the Lord who saves.”¹

If you are a parent, I imagine that at some point in your relationship with your child or children, you have laid out family rules and guidelines for their behavior, along with some variation of “I’m doing this because I love you, because I care about you, because I’m concerned for your safety, because I want you to walk along the right path in life.” Even if your children hear just the opposite and think “They’re just trying to make my life hard and miserable,” you know better. In fact, you might be tempted to tell your children, “If you think I’m doing this just to make your life hard, you have another think coming to you. Think again!” (but you probably won’t say this . . .)

That’s certainly how God’s law is presented in the Old Testament – God the parent teaching Israel the child and saying, “This is how I want you to act as my people. This is what I expect of you, now that I have made a covenant with you to be your God and for you to be my people.” So, when we hear Jesus say, “If you think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, you have another think coming to you. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill,” he is talking about God’s overarching purpose for our lives. The great British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way in his book (which is very appropriately titled *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*), “When [Jesus] spoke of the Scripture needing to be fulfilled, he was thinking of the entire storyline at last coming to fruition, and of an entire world of hints and shadows [we might think “the law and the prophets”] now coming to plain statement and full light.”²

If you think that when Jesus talks about “God’s law” he is only referring to the 613 rules and regulations that the Pharisees and scribes had formulated or he has in mind some checklist of “Thou shalt nots . . .” that God came up with to make our lives hard that we have to measure up to perfectly for God to love us, then you have another think coming to you. Think again! As we will hear throughout the rest of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, living a righteous life that far exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees has much more to do with loving God and our neighbors with everything we are and everything we have and everything we do than with following all of the rules so that we end up thanking God that we’re not like other people.

Often Christians will slam the door on whatever argument they are making by saying something like, “Well, that’s what the Bible says!” On the surface, that seems like a pretty good defense. After all, who can argue with the Bible? But what about when what they are quoting only *sounds like* it comes from the Bible, but isn’t actually from the Bible (maybe it comes from William Shakespeare or Benjamin Franklin or Aesop’s Fables)? Or what they are quoting – especially from God’s law – is ripped completely out of the immediate context of surrounding verses or, as N.T. Wright puts it, “the entire storyline,” and used to justify this or that position?

As I was reading for this sermon, I came across these thoughts from Dr. Paul Walaskay, long-time professor of Biblical Studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, who died just a couple of months ago. They are worth hearing as we think again about what it means to follow God’s law as God’s people. Dr. Walaskay wrote, “Yes, it is important to attend to details of the law, but even more is required. Jesus appears to be saying something like this: unless you are willing to engage in the process of Torah-study that leads to a deeper understanding, an internalizing, of what God requires of you in all your relationships (with God and other human beings), you will

never be able to participate in the reign of God (the kingdom of heaven). If you are able to discern and keep the heart of the Torah, then you will be truly righteous. . . Yes, Jesus requires his followers to honor the codification of God’s desire for relationship with us and with one another. The text of that code, down to the smallest fragment of a letter, will never pass from our sight or our obligation. It will outlast this world. Jesus asks his disciples to persist in discerning the will of God embedded in those words. Being aligned with God’s will, through love, will keep us on the path of righteousness that leads toward the kingdom of heaven.”³

If you think the Christian life is just navigating a bunch of “Thou shalt nots . . .” either to get to heaven or to avoid eternal punishment, you’ve got another think to come to you. Think again! After all, when asked “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus summed up the whole law of God and said, “Love God and love neighbor.” (Mark 12:29-31) And the apostle Paul echoed that same thought when he told us what it means to be truly free in Jesus Christ: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:14)

Let us pray: Lord, you have taught us that our first priority is to “Love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Lord, let this be. Show us how. And you call us to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Lord, let this be. Take us where we need to go. Let your love be the power that enlivens our lives, the light that points to your path, and the very grace that saves us. Lord, fill us with your love. Amen.

NOTES

¹Brent A. Strawn, *Lies My Preacher Told Me: An Honest Look at the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), pp. 85-86.

²N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013).

³Paul Walaskay, “Matthew 5:17-20,” *Interpretation* (October 2002), pp. 419-420.