

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
November 6, 2011

Forgiving as God's People

Matthew 5:17-26

Key verses: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

In verses 17-20, Jesus shares an important truth about the relationship between Christianity and the Old Testament Scriptures. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (v. 17).

So, Jesus tells us, the Old Testament Scriptures are not set aside with the coming of Christianity. Rather, in the person of Jesus Christ, they are given a deeper and fuller meaning. Verses 21-22 give an example of how this works. There Jesus tells us that the Old Testament commandment, "You shall not murder," has a deeper and fuller meaning—namely, that we should not let unresolved anger fester in our hearts.

Jesus knew and taught that the issues of life are decided *in* us before they are expressed by our outward actions. But Jesus doesn't throw away the Ten Commandments. Rather, He says that in Him they find a deeper and fuller meaning.

Here and throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls His followers to a high standard of ethical behavior. He says in verse 20, for example, that our righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

If this standard sounds impossible, perhaps we should remember two things about the gospel of grace:

(1) Because no one has ever perfectly obeyed God's commands, every one of us stands in need of the grace and forgiveness which God offers us in Christ. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And the very next verse says that we can be "justified"—made right with God—by His grace, as a free gift.

(2) Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount does set a high standard. But, because of God's grace, this teaching also offers a gracious possibility. That is, we do not have to struggle and strain to please God in our own strength. In fact, we

never can do that. But if we will open our lives fully to the presence of Christ, He will fulfill the will of God in and through us.

It is grace that forgives us and makes us right with God. And it is grace that empowers us to live for Christ.

Verses 23-26 present a compelling case for forgiveness and reconciliation. In verses 23-24, Jesus tells us that being in a right relationship with other people is so important to God that one should even interrupt his worship to go on a mission of reconciliation: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

As Christians, we must be willing to forgive others, remembering how much we have been forgiven by God! Of course, we discover that God wants us to forgive others not only for the good it does the other person but, even more, for the good it does us! Frederick Buechner made the following observation about the human tendency to hold on to grudges: “To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

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