Jesus Came To Fulfill The Law

Matthew 5:17-30

Key Verse:5:20 “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

People say that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ reinterpretation or expansion of Moses’ law. Indeed, we find the repeated sentences such as, “*You have heard that it was said,... but I tell you.*.” But I would rather say that it is Jesus’ teaching the spirit of the law, which is love, and Jesus came to fulfill the law. Let us see what Jesus taught his disciples today.

First, Jesus came to fulfill the law. (17-20) Look at verse 17. “***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***.” The Jews believed that they must observe Torah, the five books of Moses, without missing or adding or subtracting even one smallest letter. They thought that they must keep all the laws literally and absolutely. But Jesus’ teaching was repeated as “*You have heard that it was said, but I tell you…*” as we see verses 21 and 27. So, the religious leaders such as the Pharisees and the teachers of the law thought that Jesus came to abolish Moses’ law. To their eyes Jesus was blaspheming. But they did not know that the spirit of the law is love. God gave them the law because he loved them. The spirit of the Ten Commandment is love. Jesus summarized the Ten Commandment with two sentences, which is ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself’. When we understand and practice love which is the spirit of the law, we keep all these commandments. So Paul said that the fulfillment of the law is love. (Ro 13:10) The religious leaders failed to keep the Ten commandment, because they did not love. But Jesus fulfilled the law through his death on the cross. God demonstrated his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Ro 5:8) This is the reason why Jesus said on the cross, “*It is finished*!” (*tetelestai*) which means “I fulfilled all the laws and prophets.” (Jn 19:30) Paul said, “*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*.” (2 Co 3:6) Amen!

Look at verse 20. “***For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven***.” This does not mean that we must be more legalistic than the Pharisees or the teachers of the law. It does not mean that we can ignore the law or we don’t have to keep the law, either. Here ‘your righteousness’ is different from righteousness that comes from observing the law. Our righteousness does not come from keeping the law, but from faith in Jesus Christ. Our righteousness which comes from faith in Jesus Christ is superior to the righteousness of the Pharisees which comes from observing the law.

Second, do not murder. (21-26) Look at verses 21-22. “***You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell***.” In the 6th commandment God said, “*You shall not murder.*”  (Ex 20:13) Murder is taking away men’s life unlawfully. It is the most serious crime because murder violates God’s creation and challenges his sovereignty. Men’s life and death belong to God, the Creator, not to men. So, God strongly forbids murder in the Ten Commandments. Jesus expanded this command not only forbidding an actual killing, but also forbidding hatred in their heart. So, Jesus said that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Jesus even warns those who curse or contempt others by saying ‘*Raca*’ or ‘You fool!” The word ‘*Raca*’ in Aramaic means ‘empty’ or ‘empty head’. In modern terms it is ‘you, stupid’ or ‘you have no brain’ and so on. Raise your hand if you have never said these words throughout your lifetime. If not, you all will be subject to judgment, will be answerable to the court, and some of you will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Then, why did Jesus teach all these to his disciples and Christians? Our righteousness seems more difficult than that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Indeed, as Paul said in the book of Romans, there is no one righteous, not even one who was not angry with brothers or sisters, not even one who didn’t say a bad word to others. We are all destined to be judged, condemned and in danger of the fire of hell. Indeed, we deserve God's judgment. But our righteousness does not come from keeping all these laws, but from faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins. We are saved and become righteous only by God’s grace. Romans 3:21-22 says, “*But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.*” Paul also said in Ephesians 2:8-9. “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*.”

Jesus’ teaching is not just controlling your anger or removing hatred from your heart, but more than these, being reconciled to your enemy. Look at verses 23-24. “***Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift***.” Mastering anger and removing hatred from our heart are difficult, but blessed are those who do so. Cain in the Bible did not master his anger and killed his brother Abel. James 1:15 says, “T*hen, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death*.”

We may control our anger and make the situation better. Jesus wants us to do more than just controlling anger. Jesus wants us to initiate reconciliation with our enemies. In order to initiate reconciliation, we must deny ourselves. Jesus asks us not to wait until our enemies apologize us, but to go first and be reconciled to them. It is very difficult, but it is possible when we learn from Jesus who denied himself and obeyed the cross. Jesus became the sacrifice of reconciliation between God and sinners through his death. We go first to be reconciled, not because we are wrong, but because we follow Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*.” When we follow Jesus, we become more righteous than the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Third, do not commit adultery (27-30) Look at verses 27-28. “***You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart***.” Adultery means voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and a person who is not his or her spouse. The word ‘adultery’ is replaced today with unfaithfulness, infidelity, affair, cheating, and so on. Why did God not allow adultery in his 7th commandment? This is because adultery destroys all relationships between God and men, between a husband and a wife, a parent and children, a family and a family, and so on. A marriage is sacred because it is established under God’s sovereignty and blessing. So, Jesus warned divorce by saying, “*What God has joined together, let men not separate!*” When we marry, we make a marriage vow before God, agreeing that our togetherness is endorsed and sealed by God. Therefore adultery violates this sacred vow and destroys mutual commitment.

Satan uses adultery as his first weapon to destroy families. Adultery is the first reason for divorce in Korea. Divorce causes lots of spiritual, moral, and social problems. So, in Malachi 2:16 God said, “*I hate divorce*.”

People think that they will be okay if they are not caught in acts of adultery. They are the same as those who violate the speed limit, but not be caught by police. But those who secretly commit adultery is not okay because they will be caught someday. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and tried to cover up his sin by murdering her husband. But he was caught by the servant of God the prophet Nathan who severely rebuked David. We may cheat people, but not God. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” Our God is spirit which is invisible. The invisible God watches over everything in us. He sees our deepest thoughts and desires. We cannot cheat God and God cannot be mocked. Therefore, we must be honest and transparent in our thoughts, motivation, and behavior.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law thought that they would be okay if they did not commit adultery in action. They thought that they would be righteous before God if they didn’t have any physical contact with other women. But what did Jesus say? “*But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*.” Some say that it is impossible for men not to look at a woman with 100 % pure desire. Statistically speaking, men commit sins of adultery every minute with their eyes and in their heart. Indeed, as Martin Luther says, ‘you cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” So here looking at a woman lustfully does not mean a passing glance, but a willful and calculated stare with sexual imagination. This is why Jesus condemned those who look at women lustfully equivalent to those who commit adultery in action.

Proverbs 4:23-27 says, “*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from it.*” In these verses we learn that in order to guard our heart and keep it pure, what we talk, what we see, what we think, where we go, are very important. Indeed, our thoughts and desires are formed by what we see. What we talk about comes from our heart which contains what we saw, thought, touched, and experienced. Therefore we must watch carefully, think prayerfully, hear filtered, and go selected.

In verses 29-30 Jesus teaches us the seriousness of sin and its consequences. Look at verses 29-30. “***If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, 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.***” According to these standards no one in this world can go to heaven with their whole body. We may see many one-eyed pastors or one-legged elders or mouthless women in heaven. But the point of these verses is the seriousness of sin and its consequences. We must not treat sin lightly, but fight against our sinful desire as a matter of life and death. Hebrews 12:4 says, “*In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*” Joseph in the Bible knew all these consequences of sin. So, when he was tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he threw away his cloak and ran away from her. This is the reason why Paul cried out saying in Romans 7:24-25, “*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord* !” Paul finally found the answer for his salvation which is through faith in Jesus Christ. He knew that he couldn’t be righteous before God by observing the law, because it was impossible to be perfect before God. He knew that he can be righteous only by God’s grace and through faith in Jesus Christ who died for his sins. Now, he came to realize what Jesus said in verse 20, “*unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*”

In conclusion we must fear God who is unseen. The righteous live by faith not by sight. God sees our heart, judges our thoughts, and measures our motivation more than our action and visible or physical outcome. If you think you are right in the sight of God, you are righteous by your faith. If you live without doing anything against your conscience, you are righteous before God. May God help us guard our heart and live right so that we may enter the kingdom of God with our whole body. Amen!