

COVENANT CHRISTIANITY: JESUS AND THE NEW COVENANT  
**Covenant in the New Testament – A Journey from Legalism to Grace and Faith**

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November 29, 2009

**INTRODUCTION:** Comments from Previous sermons on Covenant in the Hebrew Bible, Jeremiah's new covenant, and Paul as the defender and definer of the covenant in Jesus.

In this session we will examine the understanding of the relationship of Jesus and His teachings in light of the concept of "covenant."

**JESUS AND THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – FOUNDATIONS OF THE JOURNEY FROM LEGALISM TO GRACE:**

When considering the new covenant in light of Jesus, no better understanding is available than that which is found in the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel of Matthew provides the most extensive treatment of the Sermon on the Mount and at the same time can easily be interpreted in light of the covenant concept. In fact, it is quite apparent that Matthew is comparing the teachings of Jesus and the giving of the Law by Moses.

It is important to understand that Matthew is writing to Jewish Christians, trying to encourage them in a Christian movement that is becoming predominately Gentile. The mission of Paul to the Gentiles has been overwhelmingly successful and Jewish Christians have found themselves with a diminished role in terms of influence and leadership in first century Christianity. Matthew will remind his Jewish-Christian readers that Christianity is the fulfillment of their Jewish roots, that Jesus is the promised Messiah, God's anointed One, who came to reestablish God's Kingdom in a new and better way.

Matthew chose his setting for this new prophet and his new understanding of the law on the side of a hill or mount (Matt. 5:1). It is not accidental that Matthew is comparing Moses, the Lawgiver (or Law Receiver), who received the 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai, and Jesus who proclaims his most important ethical statement on the side of the Galilean hill by the Sea of Galilee. Keep in mind that when we speak of our covenant with God, for Baptists at least, ethics are more often than not at the very heart of the covenants that we have made throughout our history. The Sermon on the Mount is the great compilation of the ethical teachings of Jesus. And, when properly interpreted enable us to define the ethical teachings of Jesus in the context of the new covenant established by Him.

The Sermon on the Mount is addressed not to a lost world but to the disciples or followers of Jesus. His audience for the most part is comprised of those who have been drawn to His ministry and teachings. Therefore, when analyzing the Sermon on the Mount what the reader hears is that Jesus is describing the characteristics of those who are citizens of the Kingdom.

**A. THE BEATITUDES:** The Sermon on the Mount does not begin with 10 Commandments but rather with 8 Beatitudes, eight blessings for those who are followers of Jesus. Remember that Moses in giving forth the Ten Commandments set down a set of commands, which included a majority of "Thou shall not . . ." statements. There are two kinds of laws in the Old Testament, apodictic and casuistic. *Apodictic laws*, like those in the Ten Commandments are simply commands with no consequences spelled out. "You shall not lie." Period. Don't do it! *Casuistic law* put forth a command, and then describes the consequences if the command is broken. "He who strikes his father or mother shall surely be put to death."(Exodus 21: 15) In either kind of law, there is a strong *negative* emphasis implied or real for the Hebrews who are serious about keeping their end of the covenant agreement.

But Jesus describes the qualities of the citizens of the kingdom in a much more *positive* and beneficial sense. He begins each "beatitude" with the phrase "Blessed are . . ." and follows it with the promised and consequential blessing that comes from such a way of living.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
3. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
8. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Keep in mind the basis for the old covenant, the Law. One can keep the Law but the Law cannot legislate the positive qualities that Jesus uses to describe the citizens of the kingdom. The examples that follow in the Sermon on the Mount will clearly illustrate this.

B. **METAPHORS FOR CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM:** Such citizens who demonstrate such qualities as found in the beatitudes are described by Jesus in terms of several metaphors. They are the *salt of the earth*, providing flavor and a preservative element in their world. In a metaphor found throughout the Old and New Testaments, disciples of Jesus are identified as *light*, illuminating a world too often characterized by darkness. Jesus reminds them to "let your light shine before the world that they might see your good works and that you might glorify God. He further illustrates the importance of the awareness of openness by his followers. Jesus no doubt was well aware that from the setting on the hillside not far from the Sea of Galilee the crowd of followers could see the ancient villages atop the surrounding mountains, and used them to characterize his disciples as "*a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden*," and therefore for all to see. And, he reminds them of the simple truth that *you do not light a candle and then cover it with a basket to hide its light*. The message is subtle but important in each of these metaphors. The citizens of the kingdom not only have individual responsibilities, but they are to be both an example and to serve and minister to those in the world about them. As salt, light, and a city on a hill open to view by all, they will be aware of the individual and community qualities of their covenant commitment with God.

C. **THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS:** Then Jesus jumps right into the heart of the law and the foundation for the covenant. He proclaims that he has *not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it*. Then, He calls upon his followers to *exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees*. WOW! What a shocking demand for his audience. The scribes and the Pharisees were considered the most religious people in all of Jewish Palestine. They kept the law and the commandments in the most, minute detail.

They may have been legalistic to a fault, and I mean a major fault! And yet, here was Jesus telling his disciples that their righteousness had to exceed that of these most religious leaders. How could this be? How could they possibly be more righteous than those who total life focused upon the understanding, interpretation, and commitment to the Law! These people took seriously the covenant and they expected everyone else to follow their example. In fact, many of the Pharisees believed that if for just one day all of the Jewish people would keep the law, then God would restore the Jewish kingdom. And they were more than willing to lead the way!

But Jesus went so much further than the law. And He spoke as one who had the *authority* to do so. "*You have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you.*" This is not the "law plus" that Jesus was proclaiming— it was something new – and radical. And it is the basis of our relationship with Him through faith.

Jesus proclaimed that not one iota of the law, not one minute detail would be destroyed. How could he do that, knowing the people with whom he had to work? He began by emphasizing the *importance of attitude*, not simply following the rules rigidly. He used the example of murder. You shall not murder, says the law. That's a good one. And most of us have done really well on this one. For example, I have an older brother, Steve. He was the prototype of an older brother. He picked on me, he manipulated me, and he harassed me, constantly it seemed. There were a few times when I wanted to do him in. I had murder in my heart. Given the right opportunity and the right circumstances and I would have committed murder on the spot. But I never did it. Why? Because I was a good Christian, a good person, and I kept that commandment to the letter of the law. The fact that had I failed or my plot had been discovered, which would have resulted in a major pummeling by my older sibling also might have contributed to my morality of non-violence! Fear is a good motivator!

**1. ATTITUDE LEADS TO ACTION:** But Jesus went so much further than the law. He taught that it was not simply our *action* – which was at the heart of the law - but our *attitude* that we needed to work on. What was the root cause of *murder*? It was anger, hatred, and hostility that were the sources of our violence. If we can control these attitudes, then the law against murder and killing would not even be an issue. In fact, we would fulfill and exceed the Law!

Another example given by Jesus was *lying, or oath-taking*. Legalists figured out ways to work around the demands of the law (swear by the temple; swear by the gold of the temple; swear on your grandmother's grave; swear on a stack of Bibles a mile high, etc.) . . . Jesus made it very simple. Your attitude should result in letting your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" being "no." In others words simply keep your word. Do what you say you intend to do.

The *law of retaliation* said "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Get even, demand justice, but no more. That sounds fair. But Jesus said turn the other cheek when someone slaps you. That will confuse him. If someone sues you for your shirt, give him your coat as well. That will cause him to scratch his head in wonderment. If a Roman soldier demands that you carry his pack for a mile, which he could do, carry it for two miles. After all, you are the salt of the earth, a city set on a hill, light that illumines in the darkness. Besides the law limits how one needs to respond to such situations.

Jesus then demonstrated how far beyond the law one's attitude would go. He used the old Hebrew teaching that said that you should *love your neighbor*. Jesus went far beyond this teaching and proclaimed that his *followers should love their enemies!* Anyone can love their neighbor. Even the tax collectors love their neighbors. Even Gentiles love their neighbors. What impact would it have upon the world if we all loved our enemies as well? We are *reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan* found in Luke's Gospel.

When Jesus responded to a lawyer's question about which is the greatest commandment, He summarized the Ten Commandments by saying "Love God and love your neighbor." When the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of three men who passed by a man who had been beaten, robbed, and left by the side of the road severely wounded and possibly even dead. The priest and the Levite, or in contemporary language the Baptist preacher and the deacon, both religious leaders, passed to the other side. Along comes a Samaritan, or in the contemporary version, the college professor of religion! He treats the man's wounds, takes him to a nearby inn, and pays the innkeeper for the man's stay, even promising to pay any additional charges should they arise. Note how Jesus reframes the question of "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asks the lawyer "*Who proved to be the neighbor?*" The lawyer could only respond "the one who showed mercy." It was too difficult for him to say that it was the despised Samaritan! (The Law says "look out there and identify your neighbor in terms of need. Jesus says "look inward and see if you are a neighbor." There is a world of difference!)

In Matt. 5:48 Jesus adds a disturbing statement. "*You therefore are to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.*" (Do you want a standard higher than the law? Here it is). I don't particularly like this teaching of Jesus! Do the best you can. Win one for the Gipper. Give it the old college try! OK! Anything but be perfect like our heavenly father. That is a tough one and it sounds impossible. But what Jesus seems to be sayings is that if you want the *highest standard possible*, look beyond the law. Look beyond the law to God Himself, and seek to emulate his example.

**2. MOTIVE GIVES MEANING TO RELIGIOUS ACTS:** The scribes and Pharisees had a reputation for their religiosity. And it was well earned. But Jesus often called them hypocrites because of their arrogance, and pomposity. In Matthew 6, Jesus gives three examples which illustrate that our *motive* for doing religious acts is so important. We do not practice our religion in order to be seen by men. In terms of our giving, our praying, and our fasting, our one motive should be to please God. In terms of praying, He gave us the superb example of what we call "The Lord's Prayer."

Jesus reminds us that our *motive should complement our attitude*. If we are on the right track for both, then the law again is not an issue. The right attitude and the right motive will consequentially lead to the right action. For such, there is no law.

**3. ADDITIONAL TEACHINGS IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT:** Matthew towards the end of chapter 6 and throughout chapter 7 provides a number of other teachings of Jesus consistent with his understanding of the law and the role of the citizens of the kingdom. He calls upon is

to store up our treasure in heaven, not on earth, that we can't serve money and God. He reminds us to avoid anxiety, and like the birds of the field to put our trust in God. He tells us to seek first God's kingdom and to not be anxious about tomorrow, because today has enough of its own troubles.

He condemns judgment of others, because all of us have our own shortcomings. Persistence is a good Christian virtue. Jesus tells us to *ask, seek, continue knocking*, and that God will give us what we need, although not necessarily what we ask for. He instructs us to enter the *narrow gate*, and to *beware of false prophets*, who sound good but bear bad fruit.

He then summarizes the Sermon on the Mount by reminding his hearers to make sure that we *build upon a solid foundation* that will enable us to weather the storms and trials that will surely come our way. Otherwise our fall will come and it will be great.

4. **CONCLUDING COMMENTS ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT:** In retrospect Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount takes us far beyond the Law* given to the people by Moses. *The Law* tells those who have committed to the *covenant* of God what they should do in relation to God and to each other. But it is primarily presented in terms of *negatives*. Furthermore, *one can keep the law but still have the wrong attitude and the wrong motive*. You may not murder your neighbor but that does not mean that you won't continue to hate him and be angry at him. You may even take your offering to God while still harboring such negative attitudes within, but Jesus indicates that such offerings will not be acceptable to God. Therefore, just keeping the law, or trying to keep the law, does not address really important issues and may not contribute to a life that is both pleasing to God and even to oneself.

Furthermore, Jesus who spoke with *authority much greater than the Law* said "You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you." Jesus taught his followers that if you have the *right attitude and the right motive, then the right action will surely follow*. The heart of the Sermon on the Mount is that *our ethics validate our relationship to God and to one another. And, our ethics are much more than simply following laws, rules, and regulations. Our ethics are shaped clearly by our attitudes and our motives, from which emerge our actions. Our covenant with God and with each other is the result of a much higher standard than that which the old covenant based upon the Law could ever bring.*

So how do we appropriate the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount into our lives? How do identify as citizens of the kingdom and followers of Christ if not through the Law? We can look to the clarity found in the *Apostle Paul* for the answers to these questions.