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Law to the next level

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

I remember the time I changed some of the "biblical" wording of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and read it to a junior boys' religion class. I then asked them two questions: Who said this? What do you think about the ideas?

Though most of my students had already had more than 10 years of formal religion classes, not one boy could identify Jesus as the speaker. But even more disturbing, one boy answered the second question like this: "Whoever said this must have been crazy!"

The boy was certainly not the first person to reach that conclusion.



**Sixth Sunday in
Ordinary Time**

Sirach 15:1-20
Matthew 5:1-20
Psalm 119
1 Corinthians 2:6-10
Matthew 5:17-37

was artificially constructed. The historical Jesus didn't sit down a mountain one day and deliver these three chapters of moral theology. Matthew had carefully collected various teachings and sayings of Jesus and wove them together into this famous sermon. But to fully appreciate this collection, we must first appreciate Matthew's historical situation. Matthew is the holy evangelist who wrote for Jewish Christians. The other three evangelists wrote for what was quickly becoming a late first-century norm: gentile Christian communities.

Matthew presumes that his readers follow all 613 precepts of the Mosaic Law. Their males are circumcised and faithfully participate in their local synagogue services every Sabbath. And none has ever tasted a BLT. They are Jews. But they are distinguished from other Jews because, in our terminology, they are "Jews for Jesus." They are among the last remnants of Jesus' original followers.

As the late Scripture scholar Raymond Brown always taught, "The historical Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it. He was simply a reformer of Judaism." Jesus' followers accepted his reform in the context of the Judaism both he and they professed. He simply expected his followers to integrate his teachings and lifestyle into the Jewish faith they had always practiced.

Of course, things would change drastically when gentiles, as gentiles, began to commit themselves to becoming other Christs. Because of radical missionaries like Paul of Tarsus, these latecomers would eventually be dispensed from keeping the Sinai laws. Judaism was no longer their faith environment.

But that was not the case for Matthew's community. "I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets," Matthew's Jesus proclaims. "I have come to fulfill them."

Still, as Christians, their following of the law was expected to be different from that of their fellow Jews. This is why Matthew's Jesus begins many of the sermon's mandates with the introduction: "You have heard that it was said ..." And what "was said" almost always refers to one of the 613 Torah laws or the scribal interpretation of that law. But this is always followed with, "But I say to you ..." and then the Christian interpretation of that same regulation. Even a casual reader of the Gospels discovers that Jesus always obligated his followers to do more than the original law required.

This Jewish Jesus clearly states the reason for this strictness: "I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." In other words, unless you keep these laws as I do, you'll never experience God working effectively in your everyday lives. "Righteousness" here can only refer to having the relationship with God and others that God expects us to have, not the one that makes us feel comfortable or secure. Interpreted in a Christian setting, the 613 precepts are just stepping stones for laying a foundation of relationships that is much more than the law, at face value, expects us to do.

At the end of the movie "Schindler's List," we are told that the state of Israel designated the Roman Catholic Oskar Schindler in 1963 a "righteous Gentile." Schindler had never kept many Mosaic laws, and he apparently was loose in his practice of his Christian faith. But by saving 1,200 Jews from the Holocaust, he demonstrated that he had the kind of relationship with those people that Yahweh expects of all of us -- Jew or gentile. For Jesus, building relationships is always more important than keeping laws.

The author of the Book of Sirach advised us to choose life. But as Paul reminded the Corinthian church, the key to that life was hidden away in God's wisdom until Jesus arrived and unlocked it.

Integrating Jesus' dying and rising into our everyday lives is that key. No one, in any setting, is dispensed from imitating Jesus. For all of us, one encouraging sign has been the witness of a pope who seems determined to integrate the importance of relationships into his daily life and papacy. Even the bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, is called to the righteousness that comes from being another Christ.

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