

THE MORAL LAWS OF THE KINGDOM

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SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:22-32

....Put off the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the mind of the Spirit; and ... put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Can ye be angry, and not sin? let not the sun go down upon your wrath. Neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, working with his hands for the things which are good, that ye may have to give to him that needeth. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice; And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Except your righteousness shall exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

When the lawyer came to Jesus asking which was the greatest commandment, Jesus went back to the ancient words of Moses for his answer -- words which were the very foundation of Jewish religious thought, "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." "This is the first commandment," said Jesus, and added, "And the second is like this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than this." The second commandment was likewise taken from the ancient laws of Moses. Obviously it was not the intention of Jesus to do away with any of the Mosaic laws, but rather to present them in a new light, and in proper perspective. Jesus did not mean that the ten commandments or any other Mosaic laws regarding morality were suspended, but that if people would whole-heartedly observe the two greatest commandments, there would be no need for a multiplicity of lesser and more specific laws or for the prohibitions of the ten commandments. People who observe the obligations of loving the One God with all the heart, mind, soul and strength, and of loving neighbor as self, do not need a mass of prohibitory law. They live above law; for laws are made for those whose nature is such that they will do what the law prohibits unless restrained. The man who has never felt in his heart the desire to murder is not affected at all, one way or another, by a law against murder. The law could be removed, and he would still be the same kind of man. One who loves God with all his being and his neighbor as himself will need no specific law against idolatry, or blasphemy, or murder, or disrespect to parents, or adultery, or theft, or dishonesty or covetousness, or any other sin.

The Pharisees had attempted to reduce the morality of the kingdom to a legal formula. They were the Puritans, the Separatists of their day, holding themselves aloof and apart from the common people, taking pride in their exclusiveness, in their superior piety. There were literally thousands of minute, ceremonial laws -- many more than the average man could even learn -- which the Pharisees tried to keep, and despised other men for not keeping. Most of them had nothing to do with morality. But in their attempts to keep these ceremonial laws, the Pharisees neglected the weightier matters of the law. Their hearts were not right. They pretended to love God, but they had no love for fellowmen. Their righteousness was a righteousness of rules and regulations and laws, not a righteousness of the heart. It was negative -- concerned about things not to do -- rather than positive, or concerned with things that ought to be done. It was static, not dynamic. It was uncharitable, not loving. It was hypocritical, not sincere.

Jesus told his disciples that unless their righteousness should exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, they should in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. He didn't mean by this that men should keep more laws, but fewer. He meant that the righteousness of the kingdom must be a righteousness which comes from within, not one which is enforced from without. He meant that the righteousness of the kingdom is a righteousness of nature, not of rule and regulation. Men must be righteous and moral because they want to be, because it is their nature to be, because the desires of the heart demand that they be, not because they are forced to be. And since unregenerate man does not want to be righteous, does not find it in his nature to be righteous, and has to be restrained by force of law from being unrighteous, we are brought back once again to the necessity for a new birth. Jesus, who said that our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees also stressed the necessity for a new birth in the words, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven."

When a man has truly been reborn, when he has sincerely come in the door of the kingdom through faith in God and Christ, repentance of his sins, baptism in water as a symbol of the death of the old man and the birth of the new, and the laying on of hands to bring the new life of the Holy Spirit which is the life of the ever-living Christ -- then he is a new creature. No longer does he love sin; he hates it. Not that he is now perfect, nor that he will never again have to meet temptation; but if he meets temptation he will fight against it and spurn it. Or if perchance he temporarily falls again into sin, he will not delight in it, excuse himself in it, and continue in it as he once did; but he will repent of his mistake, forsake his sin, and try diligently to do it no more. Humbled by his own failures, and by his own struggle to meet temptation, he will have the utmost of charity for the failures of others. He will love God with all his heart. He will endeavor to make that love fruitful and dynamic by loving God also with the intelligence of his mind and his strength of his body, and by loving his neighbor as himself.

Within the human heart are the well-springs of human conduct and of morality and immorality. Human conduct grows out of human nature. Temptation from without finds its response within, and only as it finds response within does the temptation grow into the sinful deed. We react to our environment according to the kind of people we are. Just as the hog always will seek his wallow and the honey bee the flowers, so we choose our actions according to the kind of people we are. As Jesus said, "From within out of the hearts of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, and evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness; All these evil things come from within and defile the man." James expresses a similar thought in these words: "Let no man say when he is tempted I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man. But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed." Man must be reborn, his nature changed, if he is to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The moral laws of the kingdom, then, are the same laws as taught in the Mosaic code; but citizens of the kingdom can ignore the Mosaic code if they abide by the commandment to love God with all, and to love their neighbor as themselves. In keeping these two greatest commandments they will keep the whole Mosaic code, and more. Kingdom righteousness, kingdom morality cannot be legislated or enforced from without, for although force may stop the overt deed of sin, it cannot change the sinful heart.

We still need to be reminded at times that we are not necessarily good because of the rules we obey, or because of the things we do not do, but because of what we are. No amount of meticulous observance of external law will substitute for the new birth. However, even one who has been born again is still subject at times to temptation and human weakness, and needs to be reminded frequently that he who is a new creature in Christ Jesus does not lie, or steal, or give way to unrestrained anger; that he must labor with his hands for that which is good; that he must speak no evil; that he must forsake wrath, bitterness, anger, clamor, and evil speaking; that he must be kind, tender-hearted, forgiving, chaste, humble and temperate in all things. Only he who is moral because he has "put on the new man, which after God is created, in righteousness and true holiness" is fit for the kingdom of heaven.