

Did Jesus Really Say That?

3. Core Strength

November 8, 2020

If I wanted to refinish a piece of furniture like a table, the first thing I'd need to do would be to determine is whether the surface is a veneer or solid wood. A veneer surface is a thin layer that looks like wood, but underneath it is something else. So if I started to sand a veneer surface, I'd just uncover the particle board, and I couldn't do anything with that.

On the other hand, if it's a solid wood surface then I could sand down the top to expose the wood underneath. Then I could refinish the wood and it will look great.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to be solid disciples, not veneer disciples. Following Jesus is about internal transformation, not just surface behavior.

Jesus' aim is not to get us to behave a certain way, his aim is to transform us inwardly into the kind of person who obeys God's law naturally. Being a disciple is not about covering over our self-directed lives with a veneer of religion; being a disciple is about letting God transform us at a heart level.

Jesus starts the Sermon on the Mount by telling us we're blessed because we are eligible for the Kingdom of God, no matter what is happening in our lives. Then he tells us that we are the Father's strategy to invite others into the Kingdom.

Now in Matthew 5:17-37, Jesus describes what it looks like to live under God's direction in the Kingdom. He explains how to fulfill the commandments of God.

Even some Christians might wonder, "Do God's commandments matter anymore? Didn't Jesus come to free us from all that? After all, the Bible says that we're saved by grace. If we sin, we just ask for forgiveness and we're good to go." Here's the thing: Jesus said that God's laws still matter. A lot.

Matthew 5:17-19 *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; (The "Law and the Prophets are the Jewish name for the Old Testament books that contain God's laws in the Old Testament.) I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

“The Kingdom of Heaven” doesn’t refer to the afterlife; the Kingdom is life when God is in charge. And God is not in charge of our lives if we ignore his commands. We can’t live in step with God’s Spirit while blowing him off and being comfortable with sin.

The Bible says we can’t earn our salvation by keeping the law, but that doesn’t mean that obedience is optional. Jesus is strongly pro-obedience.

Jesus was the one person who never sinned. And to be his follower means to *be like him* – that is, to obey the Father. After Jesus rose from the dead, he told his followers to *“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* – Matthew 28:19-20 Obeying Jesus is a mark of a follower of Jesus.

So Jesus doesn’t tell us to ignore the commands of God; Jesus **set a higher bar** for what it means to obey God. *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.*

His disciples might have thought to themselves “Did Jesus really just say that?” Because the Pharisees were really righteous guys. Today Christians think of them as the bad guys, because they gave Jesus a hard time. But back then, everyone would have thought of them as the good guys. These are the guys you want your daughter to go out with – because then you wouldn’t have to worry. They were highly committed to keeping God’s law.... All of it. The laws to tithe, to keep the Sabbath – you name it, they took them seriously. They took God’s commands so seriously that they made laws about the laws.

For example, one of the ten commandments is, “Keep the Sabbath day holy and don’t work on that day.” The Pharisees said, “OK, we need to define ‘work.’” They made rules about how many steps outside you’re allowed to take until it becomes work. They determined, for example, that you were allowed to spit on the Sabbath as long as it hit a rock. If you hit soil it could be considered watering plants – which counted as work. Even today Orthodox rabbis in Israel say it desecrates the Sabbath to enter a hospital, because someone will take your temperature to protect against Covid, and that is work, so not allowed.¹

When it came to obeying the law, the disciples would have thought, “How can we be more righteous than the Pharisees? They’re all about the law.” Jesus wasn’t criticizing the Pharisees outward compliance with the law. He was saying that they were missing the point of the law. So when Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were enraged because he was breaking the Sabbath.

¹ <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/silly-rabbinical-rules-and-the-true-meaning-of-torah/>

The point of God's command to keep the Sabbath wasn't limiting the number of steps we take; it is about learning to trust God enough to rest and be restored. The Pharisees were outwardly obeying, but inwardly missing the point.

Jesus said, his followers are to have a higher level of righteousness than technical compliance. Jesus wants to transform us inwardly into the kind of people who obey him from the heart.

That's our goal for our kids, too, isn't it? When our kids fight, we say, "Tell your brother you're sorry for hitting him." We aren't really satisfied when they roll their eyes, look away and mumble, "sorry." Our purpose as a parent is not for them to vocalize the word "sorry"; we want them to be the kind of person who doesn't wound their sibling without caring. We're not satisfied with outward compliance; we want to shape their inner attitude.

Jesus then gives us examples of how this plays out in two of the ten commandments. First, he says, *do not commit murder, and honor others inwardly* (vv. 21-26). "Do not murder" is one of God's top ten commandments. In v. 21 Jesus said, *"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.'*

People can say, "I'm not perfect, but at least I've never murdered anyone." Jesus is saying that's fine, but God's highest goal for our lives is not that we avoid murdering anyone. God wants to make us people who value others. *²² 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.*

Jesus is being blunt with us: if we devalue people enough to call them names – like "fool," for example – we are cutting ourselves off from the Kingdom of Heaven, because if God were in charge of our lives, we would honor people he created.

That is sobering to hear right now in this divisive atmosphere. If we listen to talk radio or cable, we'll hear people call others names a lot worse than "fool." That alone is a reason to strictly limit the amount of time we listen to talk radio or cable news shows. Hearing people repeatedly demean others will affect the way we view others. When we listen to hour after hour of talking heads telling how stupid, evil, and dishonest a person or group of people are, it will affect our hearts. It will build up an internal callous against them – people God created and loves.

Reading Jesus' words makes me ask myself, "Are there people I am comfortable demeaning? Do I call anyone 'fool', or worse? Have I thought that inwardly?"

Let's do an audit of our words; let's consider: Over the past week, have I spoken about someone or some group in demeaning ways? Jesus said it's not a minor detail we can ignore.

23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Jesus is raising the bar. Jesus is saying that our worship won't please God if we are inwardly hostile toward another person. Jesus isn't saying to ignore giving the sacrifice – he didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He is telling us to bring the sacrifice of worship with a heart that is rightly aligned to the Kingdom of God. Will we obey the Lord?

25 “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

When someone hurts us, Jesus says don't demand justice – you might not like it when you get it. We all get angry at some point or another. It is a human condition. The way we deal with our anger will make a huge difference in our relationship with God and others.

It's not enough to say, “I haven't murdered that jerk of a colleague, or, “I haven't killed anyone of the opposite party.” A Pharisee might say that, but Jesus calls for a revolution of the heart.

It is possible to have a clean police record and while inwardly seething with anger toward a coworker, muttering under our breath about how stupid that guy is, to resent the neighbors. That is life in a “God-free zone.” That is not life in the Kingdom. When God has his way in our lives, we love others from the heart, like he does.

Example #2 Jesus gives is about sexuality. He says, Do not commit adultery and be pure inwardly. vv. 27-30. *27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Jesus is saying that it is possible to stay out of someone else's bed while being inwardly unfaithful. There's a best-selling Christian book about this principle called *Every Man's Battle* – because it is. It helps to know what the word “Lust” means. It is not just noticing that someone is attractive. That is human. Lust is an “obsessive desire”, when we repeatedly fantasize what is against God's will.

What if a guy gives his wife an anniversary card that reads, “I want you to know that I have never slept with another woman; but I want to. I think about it all the time. In fact, I have a few women in mind that I would love to sleep with if I could. I've imagined it in great detail. But I haven't. I'm faithful.”

Do you think his wife would be thrilled to get that card? I doubt she'd put that one on the refrigerator. She wouldn't want her husband to stop being outwardly faithful, she'd just want him to be faithful from the heart. And so does God.

Jesus is saying that God calls us to a life of integrity, where our inner life matches our outward appearance. For example, it is possible to use porn regularly and think it's fine because you've never touched another woman. But that is not heart faithfulness, and it impacts your real marriage. Divorce rates double when people start using porn.

It is possible to never touch another guy other than your husband, but to routinely get lost in romance novels. Jesus calls us to go beyond technical faithfulness to a heart that is faithful.

Then Jesus uses some overstatement to challenge us to take obedience seriously. *²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.*

Lopping off body parts won't change our hearts. Jesus is saying: Don't make excuses. It might be painful to deal with our sin, but don't turn away from it. Instead, turn to the Lord for his mercy and help.

Outward actions are often the first step to inner transformation. A guy first has to cut off communication with the other woman before rebuilding his inner fidelity. An alcoholic has to get all the alcohol out of the house. It's a first step.

Jesus is not saying that the thought is as bad as the action. It's not. The physical act of murder has much more devastating results on people than demeaning people with words does. Adultery is more damaging than lust because it not only rips apart marriages, it also impacts kids, friends who end up choosing sides, and destroys integrity. Both the action and the attitude impact our relationship with God, but they carry different consequences.

Jesus is telling us that our inner reality matters, and that God's goal for us is not just behavior modification; the goal is integrity – that is, change inwardly.

Yes, Jesus really did say that we obey God from the heart. When we hear this, it can be sobering. How do we change our hearts? We can't apart from the power of God. When we realize that we are seething with anger or cultivating lust, then it is the sign for us to call on God for help. God is not just standing far off watching to see if we measure up to his standards. God is for us, he is on our side – he will transform us, if we ask. That is how Jesus came to fulfill the law.

He didn't come just to tell us to shape up. He knows on our own power we can't. He died on the cross to forgive our past, and then poured out his Spirit to empower to live for him.

When we realize our need for inner change, it is because the Holy Spirit is showing it to us. And he shows us our need because he is ready to make us different.

Let's do that right now.