

# The Words of Jesus #8

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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I know I have been complaining about Matthew and Mark and Luke and John not giving us more of what Jesus actually said. They will tell us that Jesus went into a synagogue and he taught, and they will tell us that people were astonished at his doctrine and he delivered his doctrine with authority. But they would not tell us what his doctrine was. Well, we have discovered that the reason for that supposed lapse is that the doctrine is conveyed to us elsewhere in the gospel accounts.

Jesus was an itinerant preacher and many of his messages were the same in one location as they were in another. It makes sense doesn't it? I mean if you are in a town 30 miles away and you do not have the same audience, well if it was important enough to tell the other audience it is important enough to tell this one. So you preach the same sermon again. All of us who have been preachers on the road know exactly how that works. So we can presume that when we do find a comprehensive lesson from Jesus we are getting what he taught in most of those places where the evangelists neglected to include the message.

And in our study through the words of Jesus we have come to the Sermon on the Mount which is the longest and perhaps the most comprehensive statement of Jesus' doctrine in the New Testament. And we have come to the place in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is about to tell his audience something very important. Now I don't know how his audience took it but I know it poses a major problem for modern Christian students. That being the case, I think I should explain a little bit of background that the audience to whom he was speaking would have known and maybe some of us might not.

Judaism in the first century was far more fractured than most people realize. Even the New Testament only mentions two of the major sects of Judaism at this time, the Pharisees and the Sadducees but we now know thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls that there were far more than that. We know that Judaism of the first century was really quite sectarian. Oh I don't think it was as sectarian as 20th century Christianity, but never the less, there were a lot of Jewish sects in fact there is little doubt that within the Pharisees themselves there were sects, there were Pharisees who were more strict and Pharisees who were less strict and so forth. Sectarianism. It seems to be built into human genes. We try to go to the lowest common denominator. We try to break ourselves down into that group of people who see things exactly as we see them.

Now in Judaism though and this is pretty well universally seen across Judaism, there are two important divisions in the law. There is the written law and the oral law. The written law is what you find in the first five books of the Old Testament, sometimes called the Torah, sometimes called the Pentateuch. The oral law on the other hand is found in the traditions of Judaism and New Testament writers will sometimes refer to it as the traditions of the Father or just as traditions. The Pharisees believed in observing strictly both oral and written law while the Sadducees rejected the oral law. They believed only in the written law. That is a fairly broad brushed painting of the scene but that generally speaking is what was true. Now Jesus was going to find himself at odds with both the major players in this thing at one time or another. Now let me see if I can take this problem just a little further. There is no way that a written code of law can cover every circumstance of human activity. There is no building big enough to hold the library of different codes that would exist if we had to touch on every possibility of human relations, human activity and worship and so forth. Consequently, there is a need for judgment. Now exactly how does this law, we might want to ask, apply to my life? Because my circumstances are different from what someone a hundred years ago or certainly 2000 years ago might have faced.

The Old Testament defines a system of judges who are appointed to settle matters that are too hard for the individual to decide on his own. There were teachers I am sure who explained the law and expounded the law and there was even a court system whereby if you and your neighbor had a dispute over some point of law and you could not sort it out, well you got up and you went to the judges. And the judges read the scriptures and found an interpretation and expounded the scriptures to you and told you how to resolve this particular problem and in those days their decision became law. Just as it does today. You and your next door neighbor go to court over a boundary between your properties, you go in. It is argued before the judge, the judge makes the decision and that decision once it is rendered establishes where that boundary is. It is the law. Okay. Well now when those judges make a decision, it is called a judgment and that judgment is binding until it is changed. The collective judgments of a community over time form a body we call tradition. So far, so good. But it is possible since judges are human for their decisions to be mistaken. And of course since they are temporal it is also possible for times to change and the circumstances under which they made those original judgments became outdated. One way or another, it is possible for tradition to become corrupted.

Now this is what had happened in Israel down through the generations. A large body of judgments were imposed on the people that in some cases were diametrically opposed to what was written in the law, to the intent that is of the written law. And so as a consequence here comes Jesus who knows with some precision the original intent of the law and he is going to expound the law from that perspective. Now it is easy to see as he begins to teach the law, he is certain to come into conflict with the oral law. Right? Because after all, human beings have made these decisions, times have changed. Maybe those human beings were wrong in the first place. And so as a consequence, you are going to find Jesus very frequently saying, Well you have heard this in the law but I am telling you this. He in one case tells the Pharisees, you know, you have actually made void the commandment of God

by your traditions. A clear reference to their version of the oral law. It will then be easy to accuse Jesus as he comes into conflict with what every one around him looked upon as “The Law.” It is very easy to decide, well Jesus is opposed to the law. Because most people had long since lost track of the dividing line between the law of God and their own traditions.

So before Jesus begins to set people straight on the law, he has to make a clarifying statement. He says this, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets, I am not come to destroy but to fulfill, for verily I say unto you, till Heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle, shall in no ways pass from the law until all comes to pass.” Now the old authorized King James version here is wrong in its translation. It uses the word fulfil at the end of verse 18. It says, “Verily, I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, not one jot or one tittle shall in any wise pass from the law till all has been fulfilled.” And they assume that since Jesus fulfilled the law, now it is possible for the law to pass away. But that does not make any logical sense in looking at the phrase as a whole. What they are beginning to say is, Jesus says, Think not that I have come to destroy the law of the prophets, I have not come to destroy them but to abolish them.

Now that does not make any sense. Jesus’ purpose was not to do away with the law but to fulfil it and the way in which he fulfilled it in many ways was a restoration of original intent. One thing is really quite clear. When he uses the expression jot or tittle, he is plainly talking about the WRITTEN law. I do not think this was lost on his audience. As they listened to him, they realized, he is saying that the written law is permanent, the oral law is not. And in deed in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, he spends quite a bit of time challenging the oral law and the traditions that they have known while he still teaches the Law of God.

Only the written law has this kind of permanence. The oral law does not. The oral law is an application of the written law to a life situation. In theory, there is revelation from God that is preserved in the oral law. In other words, God said something to the ancient judges and they never wrote it down, they just retained it in the oral law. But the problem with that is, the modern listener has no help in determining which of the oral laws are the judgments of the priests and which are the judgments of God. And so, consequently, it just can’t carry the kind of authority that the written law can carry.

Well even in the Bible, there are judgments. Applications of the law of God to life situations. And so as life situations change, the oral law, the interpretation and application of the written law can change. Jesus is about to offer some major changes in the interpretation and application of the written law. He is not about to abolish it, no no. He is going to change the application. Now this is troubling to some people because they think of the Old Testament written law in legalistic terms. They don’t realize that we are allowed to make personal judgments about how the law might apply or how it might not apply in our lives. And we are accountable to God and to God alone for those judgments. Jesus will explain further and I will come back to that after these words.

After telling his audience that he had not come to destroy the law, Jesus said, “I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass, not one jot, or one tittle shall in any wise pass from the law until all comes to pass.” Well you can go to the door and look outside and if heaven and earth are still there then nothing has passed, not one jot, nor one tittle from the law. Now, I am aware of all the problems that this creates and if you will just bear with me I will try to explain that.

Jesus then goes on to say, “Whoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, that is out of the written law, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Now what did he mean by that? Why was that so?

Well the answer is because the scribes and the Pharisees were legalists, and I will explain what that means in just a moment. But essentially what these people believed was that if you kept the letter of the law you were blameless. You are okay. That God has handed down these rules and regulations and all that you have got to do is do exactly what God said, no matter what is in your heart and you will be just fine. Well at this point, Jesus begins to teach from the law and that by itself is a bit of a shocker, probably for many Christians today. They don’t realize that the Sermon on the Mount, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches from the law! I don’t know what we thought he taught from but it is the basis of everything he has to say here.

Listen to what he says. “You have heard it said by them of old times, that thou shall not kill.” Well, where do you find that? You find it in the 10 commandments. He goes on to say, you have heard that thou shall not kill and whoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. So no matter what is in your heart, if you just don’t actually go out and bludgeon someone to death you are okay. And Jesus said, “I say unto you, that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause is in danger of the judgment. And whoever shall say to his brother, Raca, which means foolish man, shall be in danger of the council, but whoever shall say thou fool shall be in danger of hell fire.” What is going on here, what does he mean by all of this? Because you will find New Testament writers referring to somebody as fools.

Well, what he is saying is that once you allow yourself to start down the road of unreasonable anger, you are in trouble. The traditional view was that it was only actions that counted. You could harbor any kind of hateful attitude. You could say anything you wanted. You could insult a man to his face, you could call him every name imaginable under the book and as long as you did not do anything to him, you were innocent. Jesus says, I’m sorry folks, it just doesn’t work that way. You are in danger when you harbor the anger. What we are talking about here is self destructive behavior and the attitudes that lead to self destructive behavior. The legalistic approach is, Well the law is arbitrary. As a friend of mine said recently, Sin is vanilla and God hates vanilla. And I replied, No, Sin is a slow killer that tastes like vanilla and God is kind enough to tell us that it kills.

Now I have to take a moment here to draw a distinction. The word legalism is defined, one, as strict adherence to law or prescription, especially to the letter rather than the spirit. You see how that applies in this relationship with the scribes and the Pharisees and their legalistic approach to the law? And how it actually fits in with what Jesus is talking about in the law. The adherence only to the letter of the law in not killing somebody, well if the people who say that, mean you are alright with God, they are legalistic. Now the second definition of legalism is the theological doctrine that salvation is gained through good works, and that's another matter entirely.

When I speak of legalism here, I am not talking about the theological doctrine, but a prevailing view that the law is arbitrary. That God could just as easily have said, You shall commit adultery, as the opposite. The idea is that sin is wrong, only because God hates it and if you slip, if you step aside in any little jot or any little tittle of the law, that God is standing there with a club and he is going to hit you with it. What I am saying is that sin is sin because it hurts mankind and God is good enough to tell us what sin is.

Consider the first law that God ever gave to man in the Garden of Eden, and consider carefully his choice of words "And the Lord God commanded the man saying, Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for in the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die." Do you catch it? God did not say, in the day you eat thereof, I will surely kill you. Now the one view of the law basically boils down to that. That the law is written for our admonition, we are supposed to keep it in every detail and if we break any part of that law, God will kill us. Or he will punish us in some severe way. But that is not what he said. What God says, If you eat of that tree, you will die. Surely, that the result of eating the tree is death. It did not require God to kill us to make that come to pass. Right from the very beginning, God defines sin in terms of what will happen to us if we sin, not what he will do to us if we sin, and the difference between these is very important.

Consequently, Jesus teaches the law in terms of the attitudes of mind that lead to harm, not merely in terms of the behaviors themselves. And this was a major difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees would have taught that the law, that is the behavior itself was all that mattered, and if you hadn't actually killed anybody you were guiltless on that particular law. And as far as enforcement is concerned, I guess you were.

But Jesus was not concerned with enforcement, Jesus was concerned with the harm we do ourselves by disobedience. And of course as I have already said, here we find another surprising thing about Jesus' teaching. He is teaching the law! Remember what he said, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven but whosoever shall do and teach them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven." And so it would be very strange in deed wouldn't it if Jesus having said that did not teach the law. And guess what, here we are right

in the middle of the most basic Christian teaching, the Sermon on the Mount and what is Jesus doing? He is teaching the law.

He concludes this particular section by saying, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you.” You know you just have not reconciled with him, he is angry with you, upset with you or he has an outstanding suit against you. He said, “leave your gift there before the altar and go your way and first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift.” Because the truth is, as long as you are harboring these attitudes in your heart and your mind, your worship of God doesn’t mean a thing. Well it’s easy to miss but Jesus is teaching from the law. He is using the law of God as the basis of any clear understanding of right and wrong, in human conduct and thought. I will be back and we will talk more about the Words of Jesus after these words.

“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are in the way with him,” Jesus said. “Lest that any time the adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and you be cast into jail. Verily, I say unto you, you shall by no means come out of there until you have paid the uttermost farthing.” Now this is a little foreign to us since we live in a world where debts are not enforced by imprisonment. But there are still two things here I think that are important to gather out of what Jesus said. One of them is, settle out of court if you can. Don’t let this thing go to court. Agree with your adversary, find some way. Ask him what it will take to make him happy and try to get it sorted out. The second part of this is a little more troubling. “He said, I say to you, if this happens to you, you are not going to come out of there until you have paid the uttermost farthing.”

Now bear in mind that Jesus’ approach to the law and Jesus’ approach to God’s teachings is that there are consequences connected with life’s decisions. And while God will forgive you of your foolish behavior, he may not remove the consequences. If you drive drunk and you kill someone, God will forgive you, but you are likely to have to serve out the last day of your sentence. So don’t get any cute ideas that, well I will sin, and I will repent and God will forgive me and I will get off. Well, you drive drunk, you loose your arm in the collision, God will forgive you but you are still going to finish the rest of your life with one arm.

Then Jesus turns to another idea. He said, “You have heard it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery.” Ah ha, see we are back in the 10 commandments again.” The question is how are we to look at this thing. And Jesus said, “I say unto you, that whoever looks upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.” Now the legalistic idea is, well it doesn’t matter what goes on in my head as long as I don’t actually do anything about it. And Jesus says, No, you have hurt yourself and you may well have hurt your wife, you may well have hurt your children. When you indulge in the fantasy because you are playing games with your own mind.

Adultery, well adultery is enforceable, it is an act, it is an outward act. You find it, theoretically, you can stone someone to death. If you find out about it, theoretically, you can go down and get a divorce, but fantasy. Fantasy is not enforceable. But you see, Jesus is not interested in enforceable law. He is not even talking about enforceable law. We are not talking about having an administration downtown that will come out and get you for what you do in the privacy of your own bedroom. No, No, Jesus is talking about the true natural law and its effects on the heart, mind and life of man. The established religion of the day was legalistic, they said, well sin is vanilla and God hates vanilla. And God will get you if you eat something that tastes good and is harmless but he just doesn't like it. Jesus said, sin is a slow killer. It may taste like vanilla but if you eat it, you are going to die.

He then goes on having made this point about adultery and fantasy and he says, "If your right eye offends you, pluck it out and cast it from you. For it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish and not that your whole body shall be cast into hell. And if your right hand offend you, cut it off and cast it away, throw it away. It is profitable for you that one of your members should perish and not that your whole body should be cast into hell."

Now it is curious in the face of Jesus' teachings, that there are people who want to take Jesus in a legalistic fashion. Can you always take Jesus literally? Does Jesus never use a figure of speech? Well when I used to teach in the classroom, I liked to include as a test question, "Give me a scriptural illustration that demonstrates that we should not always take Jesus literally." The correct answer to the question was this particular passage in Matthew 5:29,30. About plucking out your right eye or cutting off your right hand.

Consider this, If you were walking through a store, department store and you reached out and you grabbed a sweater off the counter and stuck it under your coat and walked out without paying for it. Is it your hands fault? Is your mind innocent but your hands at fault? Was your mind telling your hand, Hand don't do that? Was your mind shocked, shocked that your hand was a thief? Well why didn't your mouth call the store detective and turn your hand in? Well it is silly isn't it? Because we all know that our hand does not operate independently of our mind. Plainly, Jesus is using a figure of speech. Possibly even a popular saying of the day. What does it mean? It means that those things that cause you to stumble should be cut out of your life, no matter how close they are. In this context, you could say that if a man is having trouble with his fantasies should cancel his subscription to Penthouse magazine and burn all his old copies. Cut it off. No matter how close it is.

I have heard of two incidents over the years where men have cut off a hand because of what they read in this passage. That's what I call extreme legalism. Oddly, both examples that I heard of in this account were men. I can't really conceive of a woman being stupid enough to do a thing like that. Legalists are losers. Until next time, this is Ronald Dart and I am reminding you, you were Born to Win.

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This article was transcribed with minor editing from a message given by  
Ronald L. Dart titled: "The Words of Jesus #8" (WOJ8) 3/19/98  
Transcribed by: jsm/kam

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