PRACTICING AND TEACHING GOD’S COMMANDS

Matthew 5:17–48

Key Verse: 5:19

“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.”

When Jesus began his ministry he had to enter into an already very religious society. In every village there were synagogues where people would gather together regularly to hear the Bible read. They had many long-standing religious traditions, and many people called “Pharisees” and “teachers of the law” who claimed they knew and could teach the Bible. Sadly, these people came to think they were so great, so privileged, that much of God’s word didn’t really apply to them. Worst of all, they’d lost the spirit of God’s commands and were misleading their people into superficial legalism. In this Sermon on the Mount Jesus began with the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes of Jesus challenge us to ignore the ways of this world and come to God with a true spirit of repentance so that we can grow personally to be more like God. To go deeper, Jesus now needs to speak to the many wrong ideas people had about the Bible and how it applies to our lives. He really wants his disciples to have a right view of the Bible. Members of his kingdom are those who treat the Bible as the word of God. He says those who are great in his kingdom are those who clearly practice and teach God’s commands. We'll focus on verses 17–­20, then look briefly at the six examples Jesus gives to show that it isn’t about outward behavior but about the heart. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

Look at verse 17. Here, “the Law” and “the Prophets” refers to the whole Old Testament. In Jesus’ day, some teachers liked the Law but not the Prophets, and some liked the Prophets but not the Law. Jesus says we have to humble ourselves to listen to it all, read it all, understand it all. He’s also saying he came to fulfill it all. What does it mean? Partly, the Law and the Prophets are prophecy that points to Jesus. We need to know what these prophecies are and what they mean to us in Christ. Partly, the Old Testament is moral and ethical laws God gave his people to live by. We need to know what these are too, and how Jesus helps us live by them. Partly, the Old Testament describes religious rituals and ceremonies for God’s people; these things were like shadows of Jesus and what he came to do. We need to study and see how Jesus fulfills them. Because Jesus purifies our hearts through faith, we no longer need to keep the food laws (Mk7:18,19; Ac15:9). Because Jesus is our temple, our mediator and our great high priest, we no longer need to go to Jerusalem or to human priests and make sacrifices to approach God; we can go to God directly through faith in Jesus (27:51; Jn2:21; 1Ti2:5; Heb4:14,16; 6:19, 20; 7:24–27; 9:11,12,24–26; 10:1,19–23). We don’t need to follow the letter of the Law, but we need the Spirit to follow the principles of God’s Law (2Co3:6). To understand the Old Testament, Jesus is our best teacher. We always need to see the Old Testament in light of the new covenant in his grace (Jer31:31–34; Heb8:8–12; Lk22:20; Heb7:22; 8:6; 9:15).

Look at verse 18. Here Jesus is telling us that all of the Bible is God’s revealed word. Instead of picking and choosing what we like and ignoring what we don’t, or trying to change it to fit our situation, we need to respect the Bible for what it is: the very words of God (Ro3:2; 1Pe4:11). Down through history so many have tried to change it, thinking they were smarter than the Bible. Many ignored the warning that comes at the end not to add to or take away from what God has said (Rev22:18,19). Instead of thinking we know better, we need to humble ourselves to respect the Bible and listen very carefully to what it’s saying. Contrary to what some people think, the Bible isn’t cleverly invented stories; none of it is mere human interpretations; none of it began with human ideas; it’s all inspired by God himself through the Holy Spirit (2Pe1:16,20,21; 2Ti3:16). This is why the Bible is not just a bunch of human words, but the word of God, and why we should treat it as the word of God, so that it can work in us (1Th2:13).

Look at verse 19a. Jesus says we should not “set aside” even one of the least of God’s commands. In Greek it means “to loose, relax or dissolve.” According to Jesus, we’re not allowed to diminish any of God’s commands, even the ones we think aren't so important. Of course, as we’ve seen, he didn’t mean the dietary, civil or ritual laws of the Old Testament, which no longer apply to those who believe in Jesus. He’s mainly talking about the principles of the spiritual, moral and ethical commands of God. In his day the so-called Bible teachers were watering down the principles of God’s commands with their rationalizations and sophisticated reasoning. They were mainly using it to control people and get their money. They thought they were the smartest, the most intellectual, but to Jesus they were the worst. Today, too, in the name of grace people water down the commands to worship God, to be holy, and to treat all people will respect. Jesus didn’t despair about the condition of his time; he raised disciples and had hope for them. Read verse 19. Jesus wants those who follow him to practice and teach God’s commands. We learn two main things here.

**First**, practice God’s commands. As we all know, there’s a big difference between knowing and doing. Some people know all about the Bible; the problem is, they don’t obey its teachings in their practical lives. The Bible warns us repeatedly about this. Romans 2:13 says, “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.” James 1:22–25 says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.” Jesus ends his Sermon on the Mount with a warning: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash” (Mt7:24–27). Not only is being a hypocrite embarrassing and shameful; it also leaves us with too weak a spiritual foundation to survive hardships.

So how can we practice his commands? First, we need to love Jesus (Jn14:21). When we love Jesus because of his amazing love for us, we pay close attention to his words. Out of love for Jesus, we need to study the Bible regularly. And no matter how much we think we may know it, we need to be reminded of what the Bible teaches and of what Jesus said. Most of all, in real life situations we need the Holy Spirit’s help to remember his words (Jn14:26). Our flesh is too strong in us; it makes us too proud and rebellious to practice his commands. Only with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us can we put to death the misdeeds of our body and live by the righteous requirement of God’s law (Ro8:4,13). Once Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law. He replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt22:36–40). All our efforts to practice God’s commands should be coming from love, love for God and love for others. And when we know God’s love personally and love God in return, that’s when we truly love people (1Jn4:7,8,20,21). It’s not love with an agenda, love that tries to manipulate; it’s unconditional love. Again, only with the help of the Holy Spirit can sinful people love God and love our neighbor like this.

**Second**, teach God’s commands. Read verse 19 again. Jesus was addressing the false teachings about the Bible coming from the religious leaders of his day, but he was also talking to his disciples. In these words, Jesus reveals his hope that his disciples, who were just unschooled, ordinary men (Ac4:13), would grow to be great teachers of God’s word. Actually, Jesus is giving his teachings to his disciples not just so that they would live by them themselves, but also so that they would go out and teach them to others. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’ last words to his disciples are: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt28:19,20a). Why does Jesus want us to teach his commands and make disciples? It’s because his words give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins (Lk1:77). When we hold to his teaching, we’re really his disciples, we come to know the truth, and the truth sets us free (Jn8:31,32). God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1Jn2:3,4). So his greatest hope is that people would follow Jesus and grow to the point where they can teach his commands to others. It’s not for some special people, but for anyone willing to follow Jesus.

In England in the 1300’s through the 1500’s a group arose known as the Lollards. Led by John Wycliffe of Oxford University, they translated the Bible into everyday spoken English and believed everyone should read, know, understand and teach the Bible. They were mocked and treated like heretics. But their influence spread throughout the English countryside. They thought the church had become corrupt. Priests were becoming rich and focused on gaining political position and influence. People were too focused on church rituals and art, not on knowing the Bible. The Lollards strongly believed that every ordinary believer in Jesus is a royal priesthood (1Pe2:9). They believed that when the word of Christ dwells in us richly, we can and should teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Col3:16). They believed that when we’re anointed by the Holy Spirit, we know the truth, we can be reliable and able to teach others (1Jn2:20; 2Ti2:2). Not many people know about the Lollards, but according to Jesus’ words they are great in the kingdom of heaven. We may feel inadequate to teach the Bible to others, or too scared to do it. Some of us may feel burned out or so discouraged. May God newly inspire us to teach his word, so that people can come to know the truth of his grace and become members of his kingdom.

Read verse 20. What does it mean to have a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Their first fatal flaw was that they taught God’s commands but did not practice what they preached (23:2,3). Later on, even Apostle Paul rebuked them: “…if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law, if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (Ro2:18–24). Our righteousness can exceed theirs when we repent and stay focused on obeying God’s commands ourselves before trying to fix others.

We can see the second main flaw of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the six examples Jesus gives in verses 21–48. They kept God’s commands outwardly, for people to see, keeping themselves looking good, but inwardly they were full of greed, self-indulgence, hypocrisy and wickedness (23:25,28). They weren’t really striving to keep God’s commands from their hearts. In all six of his examples Jesus makes a contrast between keeping God’s command outwardly or keeping it inwardly. Outwardly we may not murder anyone, but inwardly we can be murdering people with our anger and hatred. Outwardly we may not commit adultery, but inwardly we can be committing adultery by looking at people lustfully. Jesus knows how easily lust can capture our minds and hearts, so he tells us to gouge out a lustful eye, cut off a lustful hand, and throw them away, meaning to really put our sins to death. Outwardly we may not divorce, but inwardly we may have a broken relationship with our spouse. Outwardly we may take oaths and make great promises, but inwardly not be serious about keeping them. We can try to use God’s word about “an eye for an eye” to justify getting revenge, but ignore the spirit of that law that was given to protect people. To keep that law inwardly, we need to learn how to turn the other cheek when someone hurts us, to go the extra mile with a demanding person, and to give to someone asking to borrow from us. To inwardly keep God’s law, we need to learn to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This is a righteousness that makes us more like God, who loves even those who hate him.

Let’s read verse 19 again. In our time of relativism, may God help us to deeply respect the whole Bible as the word of God. May God help us to practice his commands from our hearts by faith in Jesus and the help of the Holy Spirit. May God also newly inspire us to teach his commands to others, that they may know the truth and come to his kingdom.