

The Righteousness of the Law (of Moses)

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Soli Deo Gloria!

The Law that was given through Moses was to be a means by which obedient Israelites might acquire "righteousness" (cf. Rom10:5). Consider:

"And the LORD commanded [Israel] to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And **it shall be our righteousness, if** we observe to do all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he hath commanded us." (Deuteronomy 6:24-25)

The Apostle Paul concurred with this view of the Law, observing that, "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Rom7:12); yet, he also asserted that "... by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in [God's] sight ..." (Rom3:20; Cp., Gal2:16). While the keeping of the Law (for a Jewish person under the Dispensation of the Law) could never result in "justification" (i.e., individual salvation), it did result in a human righteousness, which was rewarded by God's preservation of the Jewish people in possession of the Promised Land. Indeed, there are those which Scripture credits with keeping the Law and acquiring the righteousness it could provide; namely, Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luk1:5-6) and the Apostle Paul (Philip3:4-6).

Confusion arises by a failure to recognize that while the Law of Moses was a standard of righteousness, it was not the ultimate standard. Jesus said:

"For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

There was a righteousness possessed by the "scribes and Pharisees", namely the righteousness of the Law. Since the Law's standard of righteousness could not provide individual salvation, nor entrance into the kingdom, there is an implied standard of righteousness that exceeds that of the Law. The remainder of Matthew 5 illustrates this very point. Jesus gives a series of examples, in each case pointing out a requirement of the Law using the introductory phrase, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time", followed by noting a higher standard than that of the Law using the phrase, "But I say unto you". The first example of this is:

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment ..." (Matthew 5:21-22)

In this case, "Thou shalt not kill" was the requirement of the Law (Exod20:13). Nowhere in the Law is there a commandment forbidding even anger. While many commentators offer the interpretation that Jesus' amendment was actually 'the original intent of the Law', or "the spirit of the Law", such an interpretation makes God guilty of meaning something other than what He said. Furthermore, to refrain from murdering someone is a commandment that can be kept, and in fact has been achieved by most people

throughout history, whereas to refrain even from unjustified anger is an expectation that is probably impossible for fallen men to achieve. Yet, the LORD asserted that the Law of Moses could be kept (cf. Deut30:11-14).

Similarly,

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28)

In this case, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" was the requirement of the Law (Exod20:14). This commandment can be kept, and has undoubtedly been kept by many people throughout history. But Jesus' prohibition against even lust is probably impossible for fallen men to achieve.

In the remainder of Matthew 5, Jesus notes that the Law commanded, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement" (Matt5:31; cf. Deut24:1), "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths" (Matt5:33; cf. Num30:2), "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Matt5:38; cf. Exod21:24), and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor" (Matt5:43; cf. Lev19:18). In each case, the requirement of the Law was amended by a higher expectation demanded by Jesus Himself (i.e., "But I say unto you"). These are not reinterpretations of what the Law (of Moses) allegedly meant, but an alert that there is a higher standard of righteousness than that of the Law, and that individual salvation and/or entrance into the coming Millennial Kingdom was conditioned on meeting that higher standard.

What was that higher standard of righteousness? Jesus gives it in the last verse of the chapter, which is the conclusion of the entire discourse. Namely, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt5:48). That is, the ultimate standard of righteousness is the very Person and character of God the Father. For any man to merit salvation or entrance into the coming kingdom, he must be as "perfect" as God. Whereas the Law offered a lesser standard of righteousness achievable even by fallen men, the ultimate standard of righteousness cannot be obtained by any man (Rom3:10). It is for this reason that by means of "the gospel of Christ" the very "righteousness of God" is imputed to the believer (Rom1:16-17; Cp., 2Cor5:21), and "... without faith it is impossible to please [God] ..." (Heb11:6) in every dispensation.