

BEST. SERMON. EVER.
Matthew 5:17-20
Fulfilment – February 12, 2023
Rev'd Chris Johnson

I want to talk to you this morning about three ways of salvation.

- Salvation by law
- Salvation by love
- Salvation by faith in Jesus Christ

These three ways of salvation offer a stark contrast in people's approach to life; and I believe Jesus speaks into these approaches in this short passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5: 17 to 20.

SALVATION BY LAW

You don't have to be a Christian to believe there are unchanging principles in the universe and if you just discover what these are and follow them then you'll live a happy life; you'll find salvation. So there are many self-help courses out there that spell out these principles or laws to live by.

There are many people who take pride in being of good moral character and being part of organisations that promote good moral character. The church is sometimes seen as just another one of those organisations. So some people develop good moral character through joining anyone of umpteen community organisations. Other people do it through joining the church. Each to their own. The important thing is good moral character. You do it your way, I'll do it mine. This is the thinking.

So there's nothing unique about the church or the Christian faith, it's just another one of many ways people try to live a good life.

Some people who have a background in Christendom will refer to the 10 Commandments as these principles or laws for life. I don't hear it much today but in the past I've heard people say, *"I try and live by the 10 commandments surely that's all that matters. Therefore, I don't have to go to church or get too religious because I'm living the way I should anyway."* I have sometimes wondered if they have actually read the 10 commandments because the first four are all about putting God first above everything else.

In the New Testament the people who represent 10 Commandments approach to salvation are the Pharisees. They loved the Torah, the law, the first five books of the Bible. They were very strict in their interpretation of those laws and they promoted them strongly amongst the Jewish community. There was a lot of pressure in 1st century Palestine for Jews to conform to the Torah. The New Testament indicates to us that Sabbath observance, cleansing rituals, tithing and adherence to the moral stipulations of the Mosaic law were important themes for the Pharisees. And they did all in their power to bring their society into conformity with these laws.

Yet Jesus says this is not the way of salvation and he regularly clashed with the Pharisees and challenged their understanding. Look at what he says here in verse 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."*

So just trying to be a good moral person, whether you use the Old Testament law or some other set of principles for life, is not enough. Jesus says you are not going to heaven. Religious rituals, self-help courses, education programmes, no doubt they can all give you insights, and probably help you to live a better life than if you didn't have them, but they all sail across the surface of life and miss the point.

They're all about you trying harder. They're all about you saving yourself and believing you can do it. There is no appreciation of the brokenness inside each one of us, and the need to address that rather than paper it over with a moral quest.

For example, the Beatitudes a little earlier in Matthew 5, I don't think would make any sense to the person who is looking for salvation through the law, salvation in the moral quest.

Blessed are the poor in spirit! How silly. Blessed are those who are pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Blessed are those who make it, who have success. And blessed are the merciful! It's hard to be merciful when people aren't trying as hard as you are.

And could I also suggest that if you think you're a good moral person, you actually you are still nowhere near the Pharisees. They were the ideal moral citizens of their day, yet Jesus still said to them unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

So what on earth did he mean by that? we'll come back to it.

But one of the things Jesus certainly didn't mean is that you can be saved through the law.

SALVATION BY LOVE

The second way people look for salvation is through love. This is the opposite of law. This approach says there are no overarching principles or laws except love. These people want to throw out all of the inherited rules and conventions and recast society in a completely new mould which maximises individual freedom centred on love.

I think it could be summed up in that little phrase you hear often these days, 'love is love'. What I think it means is that everyone is looking for love and it doesn't matter who you find it with, simply celebrate it when it comes. And no one should question someone else's search for love. So gender doesn't matter, and how you self identify doesn't matter, and the number of people involved in the relationship doesn't matter. Love is love and as long as the people involved have given mutual consent then celebrate it. Some of these relationships have longevity, but many find it very difficult when everything is so fluid. Many don't want stability, because it is all about experimenting and exploring new avenues and keeping love fresh.

What I think is sad is that we now live in a society that is very scared to say anything is normal. In a Christian framework, however, upholding God's design but showing compassion to those who feel differently should be a reflex action for those who follow Jesus. We are to hold onto and defend Christian norms but at the same time show incredible love to those who, for whatever reason, struggle with those norms, or see things differently.

So people who are looking for salvation through love, want to throw out the law, throw out the rules. In the early church someone who exemplified this attitude was Marcion. His context of

course was very different but the principle is the same. He was a Bishop who lived in the 2nd century who put forward the idea that Jesus was God's new project of salvation through love and made the God of law in the Old Testament, obsolete. He wanted to completely do away with the Old Testament and just focus on Jesus and love. There are probably many Christians today who might think the same way. They are Marcionites without realising it, and maybe you harbour those thoughts. However, if you are following the Jesus of the New Testament and the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount then I want to suggest it may not be that simple.

Look again at v17, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them"*.

Jesus says directly that he is not abolishing the law and the prophets. What does it mean for him to fulfil them? Think of the rosebud, it is beautiful in itself but it is only the promise of something more wonderful. It is the promise of a magnificent bloom. Jesus is that full bloom. Jesus fulfils the law and the prophets.

And v19, *"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 practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the Kingdom of heaven."*

Jesus loved his Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Jesus says if you ignore these commands you will be least in the Kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus definitely wouldn't subscribe to the 'love is love' mantra. The law is important to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount is his exposition of the law. Rather than dismiss it he takes it to a new level.

Next week Brad will be preaching on the next part of Chapter 5 about anger and murder. Jesus says anger comes under judgement just as much as murder. Why is that? Because the desire to murder starts with the seed of anger. Most people don't let their anger get that far thank goodness. But Jesus is saying look at your heart, look at the seed of anger, the Lord is speaking to that as much as murder. He takes the law to a new level and asks us to examine our hearts. He points to a new level of righteousness.

The law is important to Jesus and 'love is love' just doesn't cut it.

SALVATION THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

So in our world today we have these two ways of pursuing the good life what we might call salvation. Each one has very passionate supporters but they are quite contradictory.

There is salvation by law; this is the great moral quest to be the best version of yourself that you can be.

There is salvation by love which means doing away with the rules and finding love wherever you can find it.

Jesus contradicts both. In this passage he only gives us a clue as to the true answer but if we take what he says here and look at it alongside the rest of his teaching and the New Testament I believe we do you get a clear picture.

V20 holds the clue. *“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”*

So what is this righteousness? How can we attain to a righteousness greater than Scribes and the Pharisees?

Well the answer of course is Jesus.

It's about putting on the robe of Christ's righteousness. And then living in a relationship of love and obedience to Jesus.

- This is the righteousness that transcends the law while still respecting the law.
- This is the righteousness that transcends popular misconceptions of love by redefining love in terms of Jesus.

I want to turn to Dietrich Bonhoeffer who I think explains this passage brilliantly.

“The Pharisee’s idea of righteousness was a direct, literal and practical fulfilment of the commandment, the ideal was to model their behaviour exactly on the demands of the law. Of course they knew they could never realise that ideal. Their obedience was never more than imperfect.

But the disciple has the advantage over the Pharisee in that his doing of the law is in fact perfect. How is such a thing possible? Because between the disciple and the law stands one who has perfectly fulfilled it, one with whom they live in communion. They are faced not with a law which has never yet been fulfilled, but with one whose demands have already been satisfied. The righteousness it demands is already there, the righteousness of Jesus which submits to the cross because that is what the law demands. This righteousness is therefore not a duty owed, but a perfect and truly personal communion with God, and Jesus not only possesses this righteousness but is himself the personal embodiment of it. He is the righteousness of the disciples.”

Understanding Jesus is our righteousness really changes everything. It means I'm no longer striving to gain my salvation. It means I can rest in Jesus.

This then becomes an inner righteousness that works its way out in love in the world. This is the basis for what Lynda looked at last week - being Salt and Light.

-We don't go out into the world with a moral campaign to fix everyone up. That's salvation by law.

-We don't go out into the world to love everyone because 'love is love'. That is salt that's lost it's saltiness.

We go out into the world to be the salt and light of Jesus. This is a righteousness which surpasses the Scribes and the Pharisees.

CONCLUSION

So there are people in the world today who believe in salvation by the law and are hooked on the moral quest.

There are people in our world today who believe in salvation by 'love is love' and are open to anything goes.

And my friends there is salvation through faith in Jesus who is our righteousness.

There is no other way by which we can be saved except through the righteousness of Jesus. Amen