

The Bible Student

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Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

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CONTINUING

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The ideas of many are confused by the distinction between religion and morality. This confusion is sometimes aggravated by the stress the pulpit lays on the inadequacy of mere morality and its emphasis of the imperviousness of a moralist's self-satisfaction; a stress and emphasis occasionally expressed so incautiously as to be liable to the perversion of being interpreted as implication that morality may be a disadvantage and that, on the whole, it were better and more promising of a religious future to be immoral than to be moral. Of course it ought to be a commonplace that morality is always and everywhere better than immorality; perhaps it is the axiomatic character of this truth that occasions preachers sometimes to be unguarded in the impression they may make.

Religion is always moral, and immorality is always irreligious, wherever found. Obvious as is the truth, yet its statement is not superfluous; there is such a thing as unethical "religion," having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof. There are not wanting instances to prove that one may be very scrupu-

lous in the observance of religious rites and even zealous in religious activities, with every appearance, too, of conscientiousness, and yet be anything but moral in life. A famous chronicler has been recently quoted as saying of a celebrated ecclesiastic "that he was far from truthful and naturally deceitful and covetous, but full of religion!"

But while *real* religion is always moral, morality is not always religious; there is a distinction between the two and one fitly called radical because it lies at the very root, indeed it lies nowhere else; so far as the visible expression is concerned, the difference is not easily discerned, in externalities morality and religion may well appear indistinguishable. The distinction lies beneath the surface and inheres in the motive prompting. No act is religious that is not rightly related to God, and none falls short of religion that is so related. Men distinguish between the sacred and the secular, but to the heart that really enthrones God nothing is secular, and hence we hear St. Paul saying, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

Certainly there is nothing intrinsi-

CHRIST AS AN INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE.

MATTHEW 5: 21-42.

The first occasion upon which we find Christ interpreting the Scripture, he was alone in the desert. On this occasion he is upon the mountain side in the presence of a great multitude. In the former instance, the specific end that he had in view in interpreting God's Word, was to determine for himself the path of duty in the circumstances by which he himself was then surrounded. In other words, he was using the Scriptures as a lamp for his own feet, and a light for his own path: His interpretation was designed to bear upon and shape his practical conduct. In this instance, he is interpreting the Scriptures with a view of meeting the needs of his disciples in all ages; and here, again, we find his interpretation bearing directly upon conduct.

It is interesting to note that what is, perhaps, our Lord's most formal and extended exposition of Scripture, was an exposition of the Law of God. I say designedly an *exposition* of the Law, by which I mean a setting forth of the true, original, intended meaning and scope of the Law. For while only two commandments of the Law—the 6th and the 7th, are treated in the way of positive exposition, in expounding them Christ unfolds the great principles that lie at the basis of a correct understanding of the Law as a whole. These principles he further elaborates or rather applies in dispelling the misconceptions that had been attached to other statements of the Law—using the term now in its wider sense. I am, of course, aware of the fact that there are those who find in "The Sermon on the Mount" an expansion of the Law given on Sinai; and others, what they call "a criticism of the Law:" and a few, who go so far as to find in our Lord's words at some points in his discourse, a reversal and rejection of certain features of the Law. This is not the place to enter into anything like an extended discussion of these views. It must suffice to say—that after repeated and careful examination of our Lord's words, the writer has found nothing that would warrant him in supposing that Christ either designed to expand, or was conscious of expanding, in the sense of making substantive additions to, the intended original scope of Moses' words in the sixth and seventh

Commandments. Still less is there anything, in my humble judgment, to ground the assertion that our Lord either here or at any other point in his discourse is either criticising or rejecting any portion of the Law given by God through Moses, the servant of God. In the case of the Commandments referred to, every statement that he makes can be shown to harmonize with the view that Christ was setting aside misconceptions of the Law, and substituting for them a statement of the true, original, and intended scope of the Commandments under consideration. In the case of the other precepts with which he deals, he first sets aside the erroneous notion extracted from them by a false interpretation and then without giving a positive exposition of these precepts, takes occasion to inculcate a spirit the reverse of that inculcated by the Scribes and Pharisees on the basis of their false interpretation. This, however, does not imply that their spirit, either directly or indirectly, was sanctioned by the command or by the silence of the Law.

Perhaps it will not be an improper digression, if, indeed, a digression at all, to state briefly the ground for the view just expressed. Few things are more important in interpretation than the interpreter's personal attitude towards the matter with which he is dealing. Common as it is, few errors are more serious and few have less show of real reason than to suppose that the ideal state of the mind for one who is seeking "adequately to exhibit the force and significance" of a given text, is one that may be described as purely neutral. The critic, even, is disqualified for his work by the neutrality of sheer indifference; and the very possibility of adequate interpretation will be determined, to a considerable extent, by the interpreter's subjective attitude towards his text. No one is in the best position to interpret a text as it is, so long as he feels that the thought of the text is not as it ought to be. Criticism and correction are essentially different from, and in a measure imply an attitude of mind unsuited, if not antagonistic to, the work of interpretation. Hence it can hardly be considered a digression to ascertain, as far as is practicable, what was Christ's attitude toward the Law.

And here it is to be noted that our Lord gives us his standpoint at the very out-start. In verse 19 he says: "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, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." He seems clearly to indicate that in what follows, he is dealing with case of those, who themselves broke the Law, and to justify themselves in their breaking of the Law, gave an interpretation of it which amounted to an actual teaching of others to break it. Again, in verse 20 he says: "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." Here he mentions by name the class of persons to whom he had indirectly referred in verse 19—namely, the Scribes and Pharisees. They were the teachers of the Law. What they did not know about the meaning of the law, was commonly believed to be not worth knowing. The whole point of our Lord's words lies in the suggestion that those who follow the interpretation given by the Scribes and Pharisees, would fail of the righteousness prescribed by the Law. Otherwise, that is if the Law itself were not a norm of righteousness, their case would have been desperate indeed. If our Lord had intended to reject parts of the Law, to criticise the Law, or even to supplement an inadequate and defective Law, we would expect him to say: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness prescribed by the Law, ye shall in nowise enter into the kingdom of heaven." But he does not say this. What he does say is—"Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness" which the Scribes and Pharisees prescribe and teach as satisfying and exhausting the righteousness of the Law, "ye shall in nowise enter into the kingdom of heaven." Further it can scarcely be by accident that in each instance we find Christ saying—not "*it was said* to them of old time," but "*ye have heard* that it was said." In other words, his "I say unto you" is not set over against the command of the Law, but over against the interpretation that they have been accustomed to hear put upon the command of the Law.* This is still further evident, because in several

*The single instance in which Christ departs from this form of words is in v. 31. There he says: "It was said also." The change from the "ye have heard that it was said," which precedes and follows is so marked as to suggest the thought that it was intentional and significant. It is as if our Lord had said: "Even when you do not misinterpret the Law, you still stick in the bark. You make compliance with the real meaning of its letter a pretext for violating

instances that which they are declared to have heard said to them of old time is not a command or precept of the Law pure and simple, but a command of the Law with words which form no part of the Law added. (See vs. 21, 23, 43.) Once more, these added words to which reference has just been made, will be found in some instances, wholly to pervert the obvious and intended meaning of the original commandment, and in all instances, to fix upon the commandment a meaning that could be satisfied by a mere formal external observance of the letter. These, we know to have been the essential characteristics of the righteousness, not only practiced, but taught by the Scribes and Pharisees. In view, then, of the whole drift and content of the discourse from the very point where Christ begins to deal with the Law, I find myself wholly unable to see any tenable reasons for supposing that he had it in mind to expand, by substantive addition, and still less, to criticise or reject any single precept to which he referred.

Assuming that what has been said is true, it yields the by no means unimportant conclusion, that Christ was content to be an interpreter, rather than a critic or corrector of the Word of God, as he had it. Assuming that we have here a real interpretation of the Law, we may, with propriety, notice Christ's procedure.

He begins with the sixth commandment. Its simple, brief words are: "Thou shalt not kill." Our Lord calls attention to the fact that the current interpretation of this commandment, practically taught men to break the commandment, because it put a *false emphasis* upon the word "kill;" it limited the intended scope of the commandment to acts of overt violence resulting fatally. In opposition to the interpretation which they were accustomed to hear put upon these words, he affirms, as against their teachers, that the words spoken by Moses prohibited, and were designed from the beginning to prohibit, not only external acts of violence, resulting in death, but those states of heart in which such acts have their origin; and those words which tend to bring about the forbidden act.

A well-known scholar has said in reference to our Lord's in-
its spirit." In the other cases the letter of the Law was originally designed to convey an extent of meaning that the Scribes and Pharisees refused to find in it. In this case they put upon the letter its true and intended meaning, but still managed to make this a pretext for violating its spirit.

terpretation here,—“He goes in his interpretation beyond any human propriety and interprets them” (that is the words of the Law) “from the point of view of the divine lawgiver himself. No human interpreter would be justified in following him here. It is his special prerogative so to interpret.” Now, without abating my respect for the distinguished writer who uses this language, I cannot agree with him. It rather seems to me that this was one of many instances in which the interpretation put upon the law by the Scribes and Pharisees, was so forced and unnatural, that our Lord did not deem it necessary, formally and elaborately to disprove the falseness of their interpretation. And on the other hand, the interpretation which he sets over-against their misinterpretation, when once stated, he regarded as, in itself, so obviously correct as not to need to be defended. In a word, it was not more characteristic of our Lord to content himself with interpreting, rather than with criticising and improving upon “the oracles of God,” than it was to avoid everything that was abstruse, remote and recondite in his interpretation. As an interpreter, he habitually assumes the existence in his hearers of a moral sense and a common sense to which, when the case under consideration is fairly presented and clearly apprehended, he can safely appeal for the confirmation of the correctness of the interpretation which he gives. Further, I cannot forget that our Lord was well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He knew that, long before, the wise man had said: “As a man is in his heart, so is he.” One is safe in saying that there is no doctrine more fully developed in the Old Testament, than the doctrine that God takes account, not only of overt acts, but of the states of heart which produce, or tend to produce, those acts. We do not honor the Master by representing him, as so little acquainted with the teachings of the Old Testament in regard to the relation which exists in God’s eyes between the state of the heart and conduct, as to suppose that he himself looked upon the meaning which he here puts upon the sixth commandment in the light of a substantive addition to its original content. He was certainly aware that the tenth commandment—which is: “Thou shalt not covet,” distinctly intimates the spirituality of the entire law. He was certainly aware that the law itself said: “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart” (Leviticus 19: 17). He had doubtless

read the 19th and the 139th Psalms. If so, he could not have failed to notice the language that is there used,—“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be accepted in thy sight” (Psalm 19: 14); and “Search me oh God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any way of wickedness in me” (Psalm 139: 22-24). There is undoubtedly a note of divine authority in his “I say unto you.” This authority, however, was not invoked to support an interpretation that would otherwise have lacked foundation, but rather to break the fatal spell of an authority to which, for generations, his hearers had been accustomed to yield an unquestioning deference. The very tone of indignation, with which it is resonant, implies that Christ is not putting upon the Law a novel meaning, which only his divine insight could discover in its words, or his divine authority imposes upon them, but, a meaning which they so obviously and necessarily bear, that only willful blindness could fail to find it in them.

But even if it were true that without Christ's aid we could not hope to have discovered the key to the true scope and spiritual intent of the Law, that is no reason why, when Christ proffers us his assistance, not only for this commandment, but, through this, for all others, we should, through a false modesty, refuse to avail ourselves of it. It may have required the genius of a Columbus, to discover his very simple expedient for setting an egg on its end; but for all who come after him, and hear of this expedient, the method of accomplishing the same result in the case of other eggs, ought to be an open secret. The very end of an example, is to invite and serve as a model for imitation. It cannot be amiss, therefore, in this instance, for us to note Christ's procedure with a view to profiting by it.

What, then, does Christ do? He points out that the interpretation of the sixth commandment current among the Scribes and Pharisees, is vitiated by the false emphasis which it places upon a word—“kill.” He assumes that the law is spiritual in its nature, taking account of states of heart, as well as overt acts: and that its scope includes not merely the single specific sin mentioned, but all sins falling in the same category together with whatever naturally leads to the commission of them. He assumes the existance in his hearers of a common sense and a moral sense which will ap-

prehend and approve the correctness of this interpretation of the law as soon as it is stated. And it is safe to say that in every one of these particulars, it will be our wisdom to make him our exemplar in all of our attempts to interpret the word of God.

We might pass in review the other passages from the Old Testament which Christ here interprets; this, however, is, perhaps, a case where it is sufficient to quote the maxim "*ex uno disce omnes.*"

WM. M. MCPHEETERS.