

Changing The Unchanging Law

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[0 : 00] 23rd, 1994. Have you turned it on and done all the things that has to be done to it?

That's... There you are. Well, today, what I've decided to talk to you about, I mean, I woke up... I mean, I don't know whether you have... You probably don't have this problem, but I woke up early on Wednesday morning. I listened to John Stott last night, and he spoke... And if you're in this business of speaking and you listen to John Stott, you're liable to go into three weeks of acute depression.

So I listened to him last night and woke up acutely depressed this morning and thought, can I really go through with this? But I had a wonderful time after that, starting there and trying to frame my way through.

So what I decided we're talking about today is this gentleman here who... I hope you notice his fine clothes, the quality of his tailor, and all those kinds of things.

[1 : 21] And I'd like you to think of him as the thief. And in contrast to him, I want to show you how you can talk about the thief and Jesus.

And that's where I'm going to come to, but that ain't going to be where I start. Where we start is with this passage right in front of you. Do not think...

That's probably a good place to stop. Keep our heads from aching.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. Now, I take it to be that Jesus was talking to a company of people for whom the law and the prophets represented for them the residual inheritance of the wisdom and the law and the structure of their community on which the whole of their life was built.

That was the way life was lived on the basis of hundreds of years of the accumulation of the wisdom of the law and the prophets.

[2 : 43] Now, on Sunday when I was preaching, I came across this illustration which is too good. I mean, I found it extremely helpful. So let me share it with you because it illustrates what happens when you don't have the law and the prophets.

It's from my wife's magazine. My wife is a family counselor. It gave a case history. The case history was of a 15-year-old boy that went to his parents and asked that he could bring his girlfriend home to sleep with him.

And his mother wasn't for it. And the reason she wasn't for it was because she was sure he would contract AIDS and perhaps the girl would get pregnant and want to keep the baby and the whole thing would become very complicated and she didn't want to get into it.

And so she was against it happening. So she called the boy's father, who it says was three time zones away, married to a new younger wife, and they had an infant child.

And his general advice was, well, if we know who he's sleeping with, it's better than not knowing who he's sleeping with or where he's sleeping. So go ahead. That was his permission.

[3 : 59] The woman, for her part, felt some guilt because her boyfriend came in to sleep with her regularly so that it was a pattern in the household.

And then the story goes on to say, and the problem was compounded by the fact that the parents of the proposed girlfriend were having the same problem.

Now, what that illustrates to me is that there's a lot of people in our society who have totally dismissed the law and the prophets. There isn't any structure there at all out of which you can live your life.

But a lot of people are in favor of destroying the law and the prophets, the teaching and the accumulated wisdom, the practical guidance that is required for us to live our lives.

So Jesus says, don't think that I've come to take that away. Now, it's reasonable that he should say that because I suppose that one of the basic things, if you want to get elected to parliament or if you want to become a leader or if you want to head a revolution, one of your basic slogans would be to say, I have come to destroy the whole tradition and start something brand new, a new kind of world, a new kind of politics, a new kind of human freedom.

[5 : 27] I can give you all these things and go away with all the trash that we have been encumbered with these many years. So it's not unusual for a leader to come and say, I have come to destroy the law and the prophets and to build a brave new world.

Vote for me. Or, here's my gun. Get in line. You know, because I'm going to change the world. So it was interesting that Jesus, in contrast to all of that, to the political aspirations in a democracy, to the tyrannical aspirations in a revolution, to say, I'm not here to destroy the law and the prophets. I'm not. And then he goes on to say something more about it. What he says is that human beings really want some kind of freedom from the law.

We would like not to have law to put up with. Somehow we want to be free. We kind of have a, what I would call a Billy the Kid complex about us.

You know, that give me a gun and a good horse and a faithful woman and I will rule the world according to my own rules. And anybody who gets in my way, bang!

[6 : 48] You know, that kind of freedom is something which is part of our inherited tradition. I think it's part of the problem of gun control legislation in the States.

It's that sense of, I want to be free. I want to do things according to my own rule. I want to create my own world. I want to do all those things. I don't want to be subject to the laws and taxes and all the oppression of a corrupt society.

I want to be free. And so that sense of being freed from the law and the prophets has a great deal to commend it. I mean, it comes right to the heart of who people are.

So, look at the passage again and notice that what I think Jesus is saying, you know, I think, is it Sheriff Pat Dogen who finally got Billy the Kid?

Does anybody know? What this passage is saying is, Jesus says, I haven't come to get rid of the sheriff because he's a tyrant.

[7 : 57] I've come to make the sheriff unnecessary because people are living the way they were meant to live. And that's what Jesus is saying about the law.

I haven't come in order to destroy the law and the prophets. I've come that all that they aspire to, all that they long for, all that they hope for, which they describe as they put down their constitutional framework, so to speak, all of that, I want to see fulfilled not by some external compulsion, but from the heart.

And so Jesus says, that's what I'm here for. I'm not here to destroy it. I'm here to fulfill it. And then he says, I tell you the truth, heaven and earth may disappear, but not the small, sorry, I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter or least stroke of the law will disappear.

I looked this up in the New Bible Dictionary so I could explain it all to you. You know that, that is a rough approximation of the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, which is translated by the jot or in the thing.

And then, if you look at this letter here, in Hebrew, that is R, and in Hebrew, that is D.

[9 : 31] And so when he says, not so much as the smallest letter or even the smallest stroke will be removed from the law until heaven and earth pass away.

So, what Jesus is saying is, the law is here to stay. You're not going to get around it. You're not going to dismiss it. You're not going to forget it.

It's here to stay. It's the way the world is. Now, our emancipated society in which we now live tends to think that we can get along without it.

That people are essentially so good that we don't need it. And Jesus says to you and to me and to our culture and to our society, that's not going to happen.

All you're going to produce is chaos. And he says, I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the least part of the law is going to disappear. Now, then he goes on to say that anyone who breaks, sorry, anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

[10 : 53] Whoso, whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Now, he's comparing two people here and he's showing you how, how, in a sense, the anticipation of the kingdom breaks down when people dismiss the necessity of the law.

Now, now, you know, Jesus is not advocating that the law should be maintained by giving every policeman two guns so that he can shoot in two directions at once.

Or, he's not maintaining a kind of heavy application of the law. What he's advocating is that what the law points to in terms of peace and order and unity and growth and development in a community is by something that happens to people that makes the law unnecessary in terms of its enforcement and turns the law into an anticipation of a reality which we all long for but can't achieve and which we in our perversity think the best way to achieve it is to abandon the law and everybody do their own thing.

That's not going to work, Jesus said. And people who start teaching that, they are least in the kingdom. I don't know how least is least, but they are least.

And he says those who accept the fact of the law and are seeking to teach that, they are, great in the kingdom. So, in our, I suppose, you could almost say that within the community, and perhaps it means basically the community of faith, the faith does not go ahead by getting rid of the law, the faith goes ahead by accepting and teaching the law in anticipation of transcending it.

[13 : 16] So, that's, that's what Jesus says about how, how it works. Well then, let me give you one more illustration of it too.

You know how it's very fashionable now in our society and in our culture? here, this is where I feel very ancient. You know, I, because this was absolutely, I mean this was almost unthinkable when I started out in the ministry, but if a guy and a gal like each other and get along well, they just shack up together, you know, because they love each other.

They don't need to sign any papers, they don't need to draw up any covenants, they don't have to go to a lawyer and draw up a marriage contract. They just have this wonderful spontaneous relationship between them and they can live the rest of their lives on that basis and it's wonderful. Well, of course, when you get old and wise, you perhaps recognize that even the idyllic state of matrimony comes to that point in its growth and development when an underlying contract is really quite a useful thing.

I mean, you know, no matter how bad the situation gets, the contract is there and you live with it and subsequently are glad that it's there.

[14 : 54] And that's, I mean, that's an illustration of how the law works. Sure, it would be wonderful if you were the only girl in the world and I was the only boy and what a wonderful thing it would be.

All that kind of thing would be great, but the law seems to be a necessary foundation on which relationships are built. And until the kingdom comes in its fullness and Jesus came to bring the kingdom in its fullness, that's not going to happen.

So it's probably wise if we could only accept that. I mean, because we live in a very, in a society that doesn't want to accept the law.

If we could do that, if we lived in that kind of society where we recognize that our limitations make the law is not a benefit and not a detraction.

It's something that helps us. It doesn't hinder us. So, what you go on to there is that, what Jesus goes on to there is then to say to them, I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

[16 : 23] So, Jesus recognizes very clearly the limitations of the law. And, the best the law can do is to produce the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who are completely meticulous about the observation of every detail of the law and spend their lives being sure that they keep the law.

Oh, I have a good illustration. Well, I mean, I thought it was good anyway. The, the business of righteousness which exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

A good friend of mine has just returned from being three months practicing medicine in North China. And he says, people are really interested in the Christian faith.

They want to know all about it. Anybody, you, I mean, he says, you don't need to send missionaries there. Just need to send people who can be there and live their lives and talk about their faith because people are very interested.

And, I said, well, how come that isn't true in Vancouver? You know, why is it almost a forbidden subject of conversation at any reasonable social gathering to raise the subject of religion?

[18 : 07] Why don't we do it? And he said, and I found this very helpful, maybe you'll find it helpful too, he said, because in China they don't know what the Christian faith is and in Vancouver they think they do.

And, and what it is they think in Vancouver is that, that the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law is what it's all about.

You know, and, and the public, the media look on the church as merely being legalists who demand, you know, the, the religious right, as they say, the people who are there with large hammers to try and enforce the law.

That's what they think Christian faith is. They, they, they, and, people don't understand what Jesus means when he says accept your righteousness exceed that.

Unless it's something infinitely different and more than that, you'll never even enter the kingdom. It's an entirely different thing than the achievement of legalistic perfection by observance of the details of the law.

[19 : 25] It's something that vastly transcends that. So, if you, if you, it's, it's, another illustration of it, I think, is, you know, that our society has resorted to being politically correct, which is Pharisee and teacher of the law righteousness.

It ain't gonna get you anywhere, but you better behave this way. And, and, and, you know, the, my, my, problems with being politically correct don't come from the fact that I want to be rude to people, but I, from the fact that the, the kind of relationship we're supposed to live in to one another, the kind of regard we're supposed to have for one another vastly exceeds being politically correct. Politically correct is just a kind of Pharisaic righteousness, and we need something infinitely more than that, infinitely better than that, that is based on a love for, a love for one another and, and a profound working out of what it means to, to love your neighbor.

Now, let me go, let me go back to, to this, to my thief and, and the cross if I can, if I can show it to you.

If you, if you were to turn to John chapter 10, verse 10, which is a familiar passage, and it says, the thief comes to steal and to kill and destroy.

[21 : 26] Jesus comes, I have come, Jesus says, that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly. Which, of course, is what it says in the first verse here.

I haven't come to abolish the law, but I have come to give you an abundance which is way beyond the law. The, the, the thief represents, I think, society, you know, society outside of Jesus Christ. It's, we are a band of thieves. And we, and the law is necessary to keep us from violating one another too seriously.

To try and contain our instinct to steal from one another. To try and contain the process of the thief comes to, to steal and to kill and to destroy.

and, and that that tends to become the relationship that people have to people. And that's why we need the law to restrain them.

[22 : 40] But you see what the, uh, thieves create a world of stealing, killing, and destroying. And in a world of thieves, you become a thief in order to survive.

And so, we need the law to protect us from one another. Uh, you, uh, free enterprise is a great system, but it, it requires a lot of laws to keep us from violating each other in the process of being free and enterprising.

Uh, because we cross the line so often. So that, when, when, when Jesus says the thief has come to, to steal and to kill and to destroy, that tends to become a kind of pattern of the way our world works and the reason that the law is necessary.

And Jesus, Jesus says, I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly. Now, this is, uh, this is referred to, I think, in, in, uh, uh, in Romans where it, it, it talks about, about this, this issue and, uh, and Paul, Paul writing, uh, I wrote, I, I'm sorry, I'm stumbling trying to find it here for you.

Uh, in, in Romans 13, he says, he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. You know, uh, now, you know, I'm not trying to offend anybody's sensibilities by saying that we are basically, I mean, our economy and the way we live our lives is, tends to be, uh, we tend to be a band of thieves.

[24 : 33] It's, it's, it's a dog eat dog kind of world, you know, and you steal because you're being stolen from, and, uh, you, you, you learn to do it that way. That's, that, that is kind of the grim reality of our world.

And, uh, and that's, you know, if you're going to survive, uh, in a company of thieves, you've got to learn to be a thief. That's, that's logical, isn't it? I mean, thief is a hard word.

I mean, we could use more euphemistic words, but I'm trying to use a hard word here. Uh, the, uh, the, that, that tends to be the pattern.

And Jesus says, I have come to introduce a totally different way. You know, I mean, uh, the anxiety we all have is that the government will have stolen all our money before, you know, before death comes to relieve us of the burden of this life, you know, or, that, uh, you know, you, you, uh, you walk into a wonderful shopping mall and somehow you feel that emotionally what's happening to you is that you're being told to put your hands up in the air and don't move, you know, because they're going to relieve you of all your money, uh, by emotional pressure.

So that stealing and the idea of being in a world of thieves and having to be a thief to survive in a world of thieves is something which is intensely logical and for which basically we say there's no alternative until Jesus comes along and says, I'm telling you that I've come that you might have life and that you might have it in great abundance, that you don't need the sheriff to enforce the law, you need the love of Christ to inflame your heart and establish the relationship you have to one another.

[26 : 28] That's, that's what, uh, that's what I, what I, what I think this passage is about when Jesus comes and says, I've not come to abolish the law because that wouldn't do anything except create chaos and that you might have it more abundantly.

So that, that there is, there is a real alternative to, uh, belonging to a society of thieves.

that does sound very negative, doesn't it? Have you forgiven me for putting it that way? Can you, uh, ameliorate the harshness of that? But I, I think that's what it is.

I think, I think, I think that's the contrast. The process of stealing, killing, and destroying, we almost accept as inevitable. And it is, because that's what the thief comes to do.

And Jesus comes to say that the resources for our lives, the renewable resource in our life, is not that which you acquire by stealing.

[27 : 37] The renewable resource is that which you acquire because the one who has come to give you life and life more abundant has poured his love into your heart by the Holy Spirit.

And love, unlike cash, is an infinitely renewable resource. You can never run out. And the more love there is, the more love there is, the more love there is.

And that's what Jesus came to do. And that's why we are called to put our faith and trust in him. Let me pray. Our God and Father, thank you for your word.

Thank you for your law by which we are protected from one another. prayer. But thank you that Jesus came to show us that what we fundamentally need is not to be protected from one another, but to learn how to love one another as you have loved us and given your son, Jesus Christ, to die for us in demonstration of that love.

our God help each of us to know that our rigorous religious righteousness is not the basis of our relationship to you, but our righteousness it comes from the fact that you have loved us and given your son to die for us.

[29 : 10] Grant that we may accept the reality of this in each of our lives. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.