

## **We can't hear the good news if we're thinking like defense lawyers.**

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I have some beloved friends who are attorneys. We need them to do important work, so I don't mean the title to demean them. (And I laugh with them at the lawyer jokes.)

But I have spent several weeks studying Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7) with people from several countries, cultures, and educational backgrounds, and I think this is essential to understanding what Jesus is talking about:

We can't hear the good news if we're thinking like defense lawyers.

Here is what I mean. When these students (and professors) read what Jesus says about murderous attitudes, and unfaithful thoughts, and manipulative prayers, and anxious plans, their questions immediately take a legal turn. They ignore the Savior who is teaching, and they start forming defensive arguments:

"How can I be expected to please God if He holds my emotions against me?"

"Why is a divorced person guilty of adultery? That's not fair."

"What about people who are starving? Are they supposed to not care?"

"Why pray at all, if God already knows everything?"

We all ask such questions, and we do it because we are hearing the Bible as impersonal law. We ignore the Life-Giver who is speaking it, and we focus on ourselves as if we were required to defend our actions (and thoughts!). We imagine that we are being expected to pass a lifetime of tests. Some hope that the tests are graded on a curve, while others hope that we can get better and better so as to be graded on our progress. And some see the hopelessness and reject the words and speaker altogether. But all are assuming it is about us and the impersonal rules.

Moralistic teaching only reinforces these false assumptions. We do that when we teach any part of the Bible and major on what it "commands you to do." In the process we ignore the good news of what God is really like and how He transforms us from enemies into eternal family. Sometimes we sing about grace, then preach the bad news that we are all failing and we had better do it the right way or there will be hell to pay. That turns out to be the same message we hear everywhere else in this world: The rewards go to those who are more successful than others. We have merely shuffled the objectives, pretending that the impersonal rules are "biblical."

But exchanging the world's impersonal rules for religious impersonal rules leaves us as hopeless as we have ever been--with the added disadvantage that we have portrayed the only Savior as a sadist who invents contests we can't win, then punishes us for losing.

So what is the alternative?

According to the book of Genesis, creation did not begin with rules for us to do independent of the Creator. In fact, the original warning was that we avoid acting independent of the Creator. He said that is the way of death. We were designed to thrive WITH Him, not apart from Him. It went bad when we chose to replace Him, to make ourselves the authorities on good and evil.

Eventually God took a nation of slaves, delivered out of a culture of oppression, surrounded by cultures of oppression, and gave them a set of values and habits that would honor the legitimate value of God and of other people (and even of animals!). We call these "the Law," but the flaw was not in the Law or the values it articulated. The problem was that we presumed God was sending us out to succeed or fail at them on our own. And without Him, we failed overwhelmingly.

When God said through the prophets that the Old Covenant would be replaced by a New Covenant, He didn't say He was replacing an old impersonal code with a new impersonal code. He said He would give us different hearts. He said He would give us His Spirit—not some other spirits, but His—so that this would be relational from start to finish. We couldn't do it apart from Him, because we were never intended to. Being WITH HIM has always been the whole point.

But the mentality of impersonal rules (with our failures and pretend successes) permeates our fallen world. So we take even the words of the Savior who paid for all our failures in his own blood, and we set off to try (and fail) to fulfill impersonal rules in our own self-righteous strength. That is not surprising, because it is what we have been taught.

Jesus is not standing on the sidelines with a clipboard grading us on our failures. We default in that direction, but Jesus doesn't. He gave fair and blunt warning to the teachers of the law that continuing down that path does not get you to Heaven. It's the old highway to hell in self-righteous clothing.

Jesus insists that we NOT try to do this apart from Him, because being with Him is the essence of the whole thing. He demonstrated a life--and death, and resurrection--in such stark contrast to our legalistic mode that we judged Him, punished Him, then killed Him. And He used even that to give us life.

We will never see the sense in Jesus' words if we see them as personal achievements to advance ourselves in this world or the next. That is a religious way to think, but not a Jesus-led way. Jesus is calling us to give up the whole idea that we have to advance ourselves. We can leave the advancement to Him, and take on a whole different way of thinking.

"How can I be expected to please God if He holds my emotions against me?"

He isn't holding anything against you. He is pleased with the person He will make you to be. You can set aside those defensive emotions. They're no longer relevant. He can show you better ways to live, but these are not impersonal rules to hold against you.

"Why is a divorced person guilty of adultery? That's not fair."

It isn't about guilt. It isn't about punishing the wounded. Trying to justify the trauma of broken marriage misses the point entirely. Self-justification is the problem, not the saving grace. God has better purposes than justifying your failures. They start with a different way of thinking about relationships.

"What about people who are starving? Are they supposed to not care?"

We might need to ask a few different questions. First, what has Jesus shown us about how He feels about suffering people? Second, what has Jesus told us is most important forever? Does Jesus think that death is the end of the story for anyone? Is temporary suffering the worse thing that can happen to someone? Third, if we are honestly concerned about suffering people, what would be a more

reasonable response: to join Jesus by helping to relieve suffering, or to spend your energies disagreeing with Jesus and defending yourself?

"Why pray at all, if God already knows everything?"

Why ask about God if you only care about your own desires? Is God worth knowing? Is Jesus someone worth taking time to understand? Does He offer something better than what the world will sell you? From what you know of Jesus, would a conversation with Him be a waste of time? Your answer to that may determine everything else you do.

Jesus never said it was easy to change the way we think. But clearly, Jesus did not wish for us to keep thinking the way we had thought before. Romans 8 calls that "the mind of death." And Jesus does not expect us to be changed without changing the way we think. Unless our thinking can be changed, we are sure to miss what He was talking about. And what is the effect of doing well-intentioned things for reasons that miss the mark altogether? At best that is being blind and deaf to what real living is.

You'll never understand Jesus if you're listening defensively. That's why He said the only way to experience the Kingdom of Heaven is to trust as a child would.