

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 32 – CONTEXT OF JESUS' TEACHINGS]

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***Last time we saw Jesus embarking on His ministry of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God by adopting in Himself the three roles of Prophet, Priest and King.***

- ◆ He was laying the foundation of the kingdom of God in the present world.
- ◆ From this point onwards, there would be two kingdoms at work on this earth, the kingdom of the present age and the kingdom of the future age.
- ◆ One would diminish and the other would increase.

***Much has been written and said about the teachings of Jesus so we don't need to cover that in detail here.***

- ◆ However something needs to be said about the context of His teachings as a misinterpretation of what He sometimes intended can lead to serious misunderstandings of His true intent.
- ◆ We will look at four points to help us understand the context of Jesus' teachings.

***The first one is, that Jesus' lofty teachings like the beatitudes, parables, etc., need to be understood as the "ideals" of the Kingdom of God.***

- ◆ If we're honest with ourselves, none of us would admit to living up to these ideals perfectly while we are in the flesh.
- ◆ There is a huge discrepancy between the ideal and the reality, the "is" and the "ought" when it comes to human behaviour, even for Christians.
- ◆ In an earlier section we spoke about the contradiction, "you don't have to, I can't help it."
- ◆ In fact the only human who ever has and ever will live up to these ideals is the King of the kingdom Himself, Jesus Christ.
- ◆ These ideals give us an insight into the coming kingdom of God but they also reveal the true nature and character of the ruler of that kingdom, God Himself.
- ◆ Jesus is moving his audience into a true representation of God the Father and what He is really like.
- ◆ This is in contrast to the false perception of God taught by the Pharisees.
- ◆ So when we read passages like the beatitudes and the lofty ideals of some of Jesus' parables like the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son etc., we need to remember these are "kingdom Ideals" and not necessarily ideals you and I are expected to attain this side of the resurrection.
- ◆ While we are to strive to live according to these ideals, to expect perfection this side of the resurrection is to set oneself up for frustration and failure.

***The second point we need to understand about Jesus' teaching is like any good speaker, He tailored His message to His audience.***

- ◆ The audience for the vast majority of Jesus' ministry were the Jews. As such they were accustomed to living under the Law of Moses.
- ◆ This is critical to understanding much of Jesus' teachings in the gospels.
- ◆ Jesus was speaking to people living under the legal mindset of the Old Covenant where the way to please God was through obedience or their "good works."
- ◆ "If you obey, I will bless you, if you disobey, I will curse you" (Deuteronomy 28).
- ◆ This was not a fun time for those living under the law, as it was a harsh taskmaster for fallible human beings unable to live up to the righteous requirements of the law.
- ◆ ***Romans 3:20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.***
- ◆ The various laws, sacrifices, offerings, washings, rituals of the law were a constant reminder they lived under the "condemnation" of the law.
- ◆ The annual Day of Atonement was a reminder they were sinners and needed forgiveness. They had to go back year after year to have the slate wiped clean.
- ◆ As Jesus went around preaching He tailored his messages to the various audiences and their understanding of where they stood in relation to the law.
- ◆ For instance we notice His message to the rulers and Pharisees was much more demanding than it was to the ordinary Jew.
- ◆ Why was that?

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 32 – CONTEXT OF JESUS' TEACHINGS]

---

***This leads us to the third principle in understanding Jesus' teachings and that is, salvation is only possible through "faith."***

- ◆ There are two ways to achieve salvation.
- ◆ 1) Through perfect obedience to the law and, 2) through faith in Jesus Christ.
- ◆ Unfortunately, some, including the apostle Paul before his conversion, thought it was humanly possible to live up to the righteous requirements of the Law of Moses.
- ◆ ***Philippians 3:6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.***
- ◆ Also remember the young man who came to Jesus asking what he had to do to get eternal life? Jesus rattles off some of the Ten Commandments but notice the young man's self-confident answer.
- ◆ ***Luke 18:21 "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.***
- ◆ Living under the regime of the law based on "works" produced two types of individuals and this is dramatically reflected in the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the publican who went down to the temple to pray.
- ◆ ***Luke 18:9-12 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'***
- ◆ The law, which was to be used as a reflection of the nature and character of God, had instead been turned into a rulebook to measure people's holiness factor.
- ◆ Those like the legalistic Pharisees who thought they were doing okay in the righteousness department would look down on the riff raff like this tax collector, while those with more obvious sins were consumed with guilt because of their inability to live up to the righteous requirements of the law.
- ◆ What Jesus was effectively doing especially with this parable was to shock the Pharisees into seeing past their external self-righteous pretence to the internal sinful heart.
- ◆ Jesus employs the same principle in Matthew 5.
- ◆ Jesus ramps up the pressure on the religious rulers by informing them that living up to the requirements of the Ten Commandments is child's play compared to what was really expected of them in order to acquire salvation through "works."
- ◆ ***Matthew 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.***
- ◆ Jesus moves the requirement from the external to the internal where sin is spawned.
- ◆ "If you want to pursue self-salvation, you have to not only master the externals, but also your internal thoughts and attitudes."
- ◆ ***Matthew 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.***
- ◆ God's demand under the regime of the law is perfection. The Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses is playschool compared to the righteousness required for self-salvation.
- ◆ Paul prior to his conversion, the young man and the Pharisees deceived themselves by focusing on the externals, substituting their own standard of righteousness for God's standard.
- ◆ If we are honest, humans are incapable of achieving righteousness at the lowly level of the Ten Commandments let alone the lofty teachings of Jesus.
- ◆ ***Matthew 5:20 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.***
- ◆ No wonder the disciples were left scratching their heads with the discouraging question, "Who then can be saved?"

***So what was the point of Jesus ratcheting up the requirements for salvation?***

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 32 – CONTEXT OF JESUS' TEACHINGS]

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- ◆ Was it to give people one last chance to measure up? “What you’ve got to do is just try harder. Just follow my example, pray more, study your Bible more, fast and you will achieve salvation through your own works.”
- ◆ Would it make any sense to introduce a tougher set of laws for people to live up to when they couldn’t even cope with the lesser ones?
- ◆ To do that would be no different to the situation the early church faced with the subject of circumcision.
- ◆ The early church struggled with the role the law was to play in the new church age.
- ◆ Notice Peter’s judgment on that subject.
- ◆ ***Acts 15:10-11 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.***
- ◆ The point of Jesus ratcheting up the requirements of the law was to convict them of their sinful hearts.
- ◆ As much as we try humanly, we will never measure up to the requirements of God’s holy law.
- ◆ It was to bring them to the point of acknowledging their need for a Messiah or a Savior (Galatians 3:24-25).
- ◆ The Jews totally missed the point of where the real battle lies. Jesus came to battle and destroy the true source of sin and evil, the human heart.
- ◆ Upgrading external forces like the law would never achieve a changed heart. It had to come from an internal source, a new heart, and a new creation in Jesus Christ.
- ◆ So as we read the teaching of Jesus we need to understand what he was trying to achieve with His audience, especially the self-righteous ones.
- ◆ The point of Jesus’ parable of the two men who went down to the temple to pray was to bring the self-righteous Pharisee to the same conclusion the lowly publican had already reached. “Humanly, I can’t do it myself and therefore need to throw myself on the mercy of God.”

***This brings us to the fourth point we need to keep in mind when examining the teaching of Jesus, and that is, He was laying the groundwork for righteousness to be obtained through “grace.”***

- ◆ As already mentioned, the Jews were living under the mindset of the Law where the way to win God’s approval was through “works” and obedience to the law.
- ◆ The whole sorry conclusion of Israel’s history of living under the law was to convince them of their complete and utter failure to live up to the righteous requirement of the law.
- ◆ It was to prepare them for a righteousness to come from another source.
- ◆ So after softening them up with the impossible demands of the law, Jesus is now ready to reveal the way to true righteousness.
- ◆ This is Paul’s message in Romans 3.
- ◆ ***Romans 3:19-20 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.***
- ◆ The law was to serve the purpose of showing the vast chasm between God’s righteousness and man’s righteousness so we would recognise our need for a Savior.
- ◆ And what would the Savior do for us?
- ◆ ***V.21 But now (after Jesus’ death and resurrection) apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God***
- ◆ Jesus with his uncompromising stance on the law was laying the groundwork for the transition from law to grace
- ◆ However this new way didn’t become evident even to his disciples until after His death and resurrection.
- ◆ The true gospel of grace was veiled behind the law until it was revealed for the whole world to marvel at once they understood the events surrounding Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- ◆ And this is why the writing of Paul and other New Testament writers present the gospel from a different perspective to the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke that primarily record Jesus’ teachings to the Jews prior to the cross.

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 32 – CONTEXT OF JESUS' TEACHINGS]

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- ◆ The disciples, Paul and other New Testament writers after Calvary sat dumbfounded at what had unfolded before them.
- ◆ Acceptance by God no longer depended on their righteousness, but on Christ's righteousness performed on their behalf.
- ◆ Their whole paradigm had shifted from trying to gain favour with God through their "works" to understanding their acceptance by "faith" in the saving work of Jesus.
- ◆ Saving faith is simply an acceptance of what Christ has done on our behalf it's that simple.
- ◆ **Romans 4:5 However, to the one who does not "work" but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.**
- ◆ As only Jesus has lived up to the righteous requirements of God's holy law, it is only faith in His righteous life lived on our behalf that makes us acceptable.
- ◆ There is no other way.

**So when we read the teachings of Jesus, primarily the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we need to examine them from these four perspectives.**

- 1) Passages like the beatitudes and many of Jesus' parables need to be understood as the "ideals" of the kingdom of God, and not something we are going to achieve this side of the resurrection.
- 2) Like any good speaker, Jesus tailored his message to His audience. His audience were Jews living under the law so this needs to be taken into account.
- 3) The point of Jesus ratcheting up the requirements of the law was to convict His audience of their sinful hearts. We can never live up to God's holy requirements no matter how hard we try.
- 4) Jesus was laying the groundwork for righteousness to be obtained through "grace." He was saying "It is not possible through your own works, so let Me show you how you can obtain it my way."

**Let's take a look at the parable of the prodigal son to see how these principles apply to Jesus' teachings.**

- ◆ First of all, who lives up to the kingdom ideals in the story?
- ◆ The only character who lives up to the ideals of the kingdom is the father.
- ◆ It is the father who bears the insult when the younger brother wishes he were dead in order to demand his inheritance; it is the father who hangs over the back fence waiting for him to return; forgives him when he returns with his tail between his legs and restores him as a family member despite the shame and scandal he has brought on the family.
- ◆ It is the father as the peacemaker who approaches the self-righteous older brother and entreats him to come join the party.
- ◆ And whom does the father represent in the story? It is God Himself. He perfectly demonstrates the rule of kingdom ideals.
- ◆ This ought to be encouraging news for mankind as we are all prodigals and know that we will be treated the same way when we approach our gracious heavenly Father.
- ◆ He will treat us according to His kingdom ideals rather than man's concept of God's justice represented by the older brother.
- ◆ In the wider context, the parable of the prodigal son is an encapsulation of the story of mankind and how we turned our back on a loving God, yet he lovingly pursues us relentlessly until the relationship is restored.

**Second, notice the different approach the father uses as he deals with each son according to his mindset.**

- ◆ We spoke about how living under the law produces two types of people personified by the Pharisee and the publican as they went down to the temple to pray.
- ◆ The father dealt compassionately with both the non-religious sinner (the prodigal) and the religious sinner (older brother) in order to restore the family relationship.
- ◆ He tailored his message according to his audience in order to win them back.

**Thirdly, the father, through His actions, ratchets up the demands of God's law by showing the older brother how incapable he was of ever measuring up to God's holy requirements in order to melt his stony heart.**

- ◆ As mentioned earlier, the scribes and Pharisees had an unfortunate habit of hiding behind the law in that they substituted their own standard of righteousness in place of God's righteousness not understanding how vast the gulf was between their standard and a Holy God's standard.

## [IN GOD'S IMAGE 32 – CONTEXT OF JESUS' TEACHINGS]

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- ◆ Jesus was simply echoing the Old Covenant's admonition of "Become holy as I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).
- ◆ Jesus' audience is left hanging wondering how the older brother would respond to his father's plea.
- ◆ Would he remain outside sulking and indignant at the way his immoral brother was being treated while he, as the good son was snubbed?
- ◆ Or did his father's words break his stony heart, allowing him to put aside his feeling of false superiority and righteousness and join the celebrations?

***And fourthly, Jesus' parable was preparing the groundwork to demonstrate the difference of living under the administration of grace rather than the law.***

- ◆ Here is the contrast between the older son who was living the mindset of the law and the father living the mindset of grace.
- ◆ You could imagine both the Pharisees and us nodding in agreement with the concerns of the older brother.
- ◆ ***Luke 15:28-30 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'***
- ◆ As mentioned before, living under grace will drive the self-righteous crazy because it is so unfair.
- ◆ But it is a false assumption, because no matter how good we are, "***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God***" (Romans 3:23).
- ◆ The Pharisees and the older brother failed to realise that from God's perspective, He is dealing with both religious and non-religious sinners.
- ◆ In God's eyes, all are sinners and fall well short of the glory of God.
- ◆ As such all are in need of "grace."
- ◆ So as we study the teachings of Jesus we need to be mindful of these four principles in applying them to our lives.
- ◆ At a future time we will come back to the subject of kingdom ideals in the life of a Christian when we get to the section on the church.