Anger and Grace
Matthew 5:17-26

When you moved to Switzerland, or if you've moved anywhere else for that matter, what part of the culture, or the laws here, took the most getting used to? The language? Or the amount of cheese you get to consume without feeling guilty? Or the fact that you can't buy *even* cheese on Sundays?

Every society has certain rules or accepted behaviour that make it different, don't they, and in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is telling us what those are for the Kingdom of God – what it is that makes the kingdom distinctive. And so far, Jesus has talked about what our characters and our influence should look like as Christians. But now he begins to flesh out what that means - and he does so by raising the issue of the law.

You see, among the many remarkable things Jesus says, one here could easily pass you by. Verse 18, 'Truly, I say to you…' And that's remarkable because the Old Testament prophets would typically say, 'thus says the Lord' and the rabbis would say, 'well, Moses says…'; and later the apostles would say, 'It is written…'. But here is Jesus saying, 'truly, truly, *I* say to you.' So here is a guy who is claiming an authority for himself, and for his words, that no-one else ever did. And the people who heard him *felt* that authority – 'we've never heard anyone like this' they said, 'this guy teaches with authority, not like our other religious leaders.'

But of course that raised a question, didn't it? And that was, 'how does Jesus' authority relate to Moses, to the Old Testament, to the Law, to the prophets' because he's doing stuff, like healing on the Sabbath, that our religious teachers don't like, and he seems to criticise them for obeying the law in meticulous detail, and he's saying stuff that puts his words up here on a level with Scripture, so is he saying God's law no longer applies and now it's his word that goes?

And if you think about it, that is not simply of academic or historical interest, is it?

Two Robbers of Joy
Now did you notice, that before Jesus spells out how his followers, you and I, are to live, he mentions the kingdom of heaven three times? In v19 he talks about who will be called 'least in the kingdom of heaven' and then who will be 'great in the kingdom of heaven'; and then, in v20, he talks of those who will 'never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

So if the kingdom of heaven represents all that is good and beautiful, if it represents living a life at peace with God and with others, under God's good rule, where you know God's forgiveness and acceptance and blessing, alongside a deep inner fulfilment, and an abundance of life; where all that is wrong is put right and every tear is wiped away, then this matters hugely for us, doesn't it? Because this is about how we enter into true happiness and joy now and experience and enjoy that to the greatest possible degree in the future.

But, Jesus says, someone's enjoyment of that, or even your ever entering into that, is far from a given. And the reason is that there are two bandits, two thieves, who if you let them, will rob you of that joy.

You see, imagine you're walking along a road through a dark forest. And on either side of you, in amongst the trees, are two robbers, one on each side. And they're tracking you. But all the time you stay on that road those robbers can't touch you, or lay a hand on you – you're perfectly safe; but stray off that path and into the trees and either one of them will take all that you have and leave you penniless. It doesn't matter whose hands you fall into, the robber to the right or the robber to the left, they'll take all that you have.

Or, imagine, you're walking along a ridge path high up in the mountains, and on either side is this steep off-drop, ending in two ravines far down on either side. Stay on the path and you'll be fine, but fall either side and your walk is over.

And those two robbers who want to take all you have, those two ravines which would rob you of life, are called Lawlessness and Legalism. And they are two ways in which people think they can either enter the kingdom of heaven, or enjoy a fulfilled and abundant life, or, having entered the kingdom, they think they can find God's blessing in that kingdom.

Think about the first one. Think about lawlessness; and look at what Jesus says in v17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets." Now, in Jesus' day people were questioning that because it seemed like the people Jesus picked a fight with were the Pharisees, who specialised in keeping the law. But today, someone might think there's no way that obeying Old Testament commands, or listening to the voice of the prophets, is anyway to find happiness or fulfilment in life. I mean, why would you follow something written thousands of years ago, that's totally irrelevant today? It's worse than medieval. Or, you might think that the whole idea of someone telling you how you should live your life is off – it's for me to decide what makes me happy, and I need to be true to myself. I need to be free. Or, we might think that God's a God of love, so he's not going to be looking down telling me how I should or should not live. That's what a *judge* does, that's what *rules* are for, and that's not what God's like.

Now if you're already a Christian, you probably don't fall for any of those. But when it comes to finding happiness and joy, do you? Because that's how temptation works, doesn't it? It tries to persuade you that you'll be happier, you'll be more fulfilled, you'll get more respect, if you do this thing that deep down you know to be wrong. So you think you'll be happier if you give into your greed and buy that thing. You're struggling in your marriage, and you're tempted to think that you might find what you're looking for outside your marriage. You promote yourself thinking that'll clear the way for what you want, and as you do you subtly stab someone else in the back.

In other words, we can think that the way to thrive, the way I'll get what I want from life, is to push God's law aside. Or if not push it aside, we do what Jesus calls says here in v19: we 'relax' it. We loosen its grip on our conscience, we lessen its directing power in our lives, we lower its authority over how we think and live. The irony, of course, is that whenever we ditch God's law, we inevitably replace it with some other law to guide us, like: 'what other people think of me' or 'doing what I want'. And those are cruel taskmasters.

But Jesus says, v17, "I have not come to abolish them [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfil them." And God's laws have enduring relevance to your life, Jesus says, v18-19: "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

So true joy in the kingdom of God comes with whole-hearted obedience to God. You see, rebels are rarely happy are they? When someone is chafing and frustrated under someone else's rule or leadership, they're rarely happy. And you and I will only know true happiness in God's kingdom, when we delight to do his will; when we love to obey the king.

So, you might think, if the answer isn't lawlessness, it must be law-keeping – we've got to become more like the Pharisees, who were experts at it.

But, if lawlessness is one robber of joy, legalism is the other. You see, if you're not yet a Christian it's easy to think that to enter God's kingdom, you've just got to do enough. If you obey his moral law; or do enough good; or become spiritual enough, you can earn God's favour. And if you do your bit, God will do his. In fact, he has to do his bit, because you've earned it. But also, if you're already a Christian, it doesn't mean your immune to this, does it? 'Sure I'm in the kingdom, but if God's going to bless me, or if I'm to stay acceptable to him, or if I want to deal with my guilty conscience because I've sinned in this area, I've got to earn it, I've got to do enough good, I've got to outweigh my bad with my good and somehow put God in my debt.'

But religious legalism is no way to joy, is it? You see, either you keep failing and you know you don't make the grade, and that drags you down; or you think you do make the grade and that makes you proud.

And just like lawlessness, legalism also has this way of relaxing God's law – because it limits it. And it limits it because it tends to concentrate on outward behaviour, on what you do or don't do – like sex, or drugs, or money – without addressing the deep heart issues, like my pride. And that means, that if I'm a legalist, I can look down on those sinners who do do what I don't do – and so legalism doesn't just fail to root out my pride, it gives it a rich soil to grow in.

And so, Jesus says, religious legalism can never save you. Verse 20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And the people hearing that must have gone, "What?! You cannot be serious Jesus! The scribes and the Pharisees are the most righteous, law-keeping people we know!' I mean think about it, that would be like you being told that to enter God's kingdom you need to run faster than Usain Bolt. 'Usain Bolt?? There's no way I could do that!'

So how can Jesus possibly say that to enter, and find joy in God's kingdom, your righteousness has got to be even greater than theirs? Because Jesus is talking

about a very different kind of righteousness than that of legalistic religion that ticks the boxes of rules I've kept.

A Matter of the Heart

And in the rest of chapter 5 Jesus gives examples of what he's talking about. But in doing so, he wants you to see that God's law is far more penetrating than you imagine. And he hasn't come to destroy what God's law demands, but to show you just how deep it goes.

And the first example Jesus gives is the commandment against murder. Verse 21, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement."

So, imagine you're a first-century Pharisee, or simply imagine that you're you and you think that to experience God's favour on your life, or to enter the kingdom of God, or to be happy in the kingdom, you've got to obey that law among others, you've got to be guilt free when it comes to murder. What you do is you see the word *murder* and think 'phew, well, I've never killed anyone. So I can tick that one off.'

But Jesus is saying that what you're doing is relaxing God's command, you're restricting it to the taking of life in homicide. And Jesus says, 'no, it goes much deeper than that. It includes thoughts and words as well as deeds; anger and insults as well as murder.' Because the real issue of murder, the place where it all begins, is in the heart. As one commentator [Green] says, murder is the fruit, hatred is the root. So, sure you've never killed anyone, but have you ever insulted someone? Or said under your breath 'you fool'? Or been so angry with someone you wished them harm? Now, of course you didn't carry it out, but that's what you wish. And Jesus says, 'then you've broken that commandment'. As the apostle John writes later, 'Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer' (1 John 3:15). Because long before murder is an issue of the hands, it's an issue of the heart.

Now, not all anger is evil is it? God expresses his own wrath. Christ threw the money-changers out of the Temple. And there's an anger against sin and injustice that's right and wishes no one wrong. But you and I are rarely angry like that. Instead, Jesus is talking about the anger of hatred, or wounded pride, or self-centredness, or of having our wants thwarted – the anger of revenge.

And when Jesus applies the law like that, you suddenly realise that maybe I'm not in the clear after all. Maybe I can't be quite so quick to tick this one off. Maybe my heart is not so guilt free after all.

But if that wasn't bad enough, Jesus widens the meaning of this law further, and it includes not just you getting angry with others, but you causing others to get angry with you for good reason. You see, in v23-26 Jesus uses two pictures. In the first, you're on your way to the temple, or to church, and you remember, v23, 'that your brother has something against you.' You've made someone else angry. In the second, you're on your way to court because someone has accused you of

something. Again, someone's got something against you. And in both cases Jesus says, do all you can to be reconciled to him. Why?

Because, whether it's your anger, or someone's anger towards you, it eats people up; it destroys. And it destroys Jesus says, not just in this life, but in eternity. It's why Paul says, 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with all' (Romans 12:18). Now it may not be possible, despite all you do, to be reconciled, but as far as you can… live at peace. Because the consequences of not living at peace are bad.

So, it's not that you avoid one robber of your joy – lawlessness – by throwing yourself into the hands of legalism, that's not what will help you thrive in the kingdom. Jesus is after a righteousness of the heart: a righteousness that, from the heart, loves rather than hates. That doesn't try and limit God's law so narrowly that it gets in, but recognises its soul penetrating depth and embraces it. A righteousness that doesn't obey so it looks good to others, but obeys from pure motives. An inner, not an outer righteousness.

But to get that, you need a heart transplant, don't you? You need someone or something to change your heart.

New Covenant, New Hearts

Look again at what Jesus says in v17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." You see, it's only Jesus who can ever say that he has perfectly kept God's law. Remember when that young man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to have eternal life? Jesus replied, 'keep the commandments'. And the young man replies – 'done that!' But he can only say that because he has so narrowly defined God's law, because he doesn't allow it to search his heart. And when you do, you realise that all of us stand guilty, and only Jesus stands clean. Only he has met the demands of the law and the prophets.

But then God does something wonderful with Jesus' righteousness. You see, Jesus has come as the second Adam. You know in a tribal or a patriarchal culture, if you're chief is shamed, the whole tribe is shamed. But if your chief is honoured, the whole tribe is honoured. If he's victorious in battle, the whole tribe are champions. Why? Because he's their head – he's their representative. And in the first Adam, everyone dies. The first head of our tribe failed, and as a result, we all fail. But now the second Adam has come, and he didn't fail, he perfectly kept God's law. And so now the choice is – whose tribe will you be in? And if you come to Jesus' tribe, if you put your faith in him, he's obtained this righteousness for you, and it's counted to you as you count yourself in him.

But that's not all Jesus means here about fulfilling the Law and the Prophets. He means that all along, the Law and the Prophets were pointing forward to him – and he's their fulfilment. All those prophecies about the coming servant of the Lord, or the prophet greater than Moses, or the Son of David, who will rule on David's throne forever? He's their fulfilment. All those laws about clean and unclean? He's their fulfilment as he makes the unclean, clean. All those laws about the priesthood? He's the ultimate great high priest who throws open

heaven's door. All those laws about blood sacrifices? He is our Passover Lamb, our Day of Atonement scapegoat. His sacrifice of himself at the cross once and for all fulfilled them all, as he was hated and insulted and treated with contempt. As he was murdered. And the full weight of God's law, and God's righteous anger for our sin, for all those times we fail to keep God's law, fell upon him, as he stepped into our place and paid the penalty for us.

And as he does so he inaugurates a new covenant – the covenant of God's grace, of God treating us way better than we deserve. And as we put our faith in Jesus and what he has done for us, God does something incredible in our hearts. And the Prophets of the Old Testament said all along this would happen: Ezekiel 36: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (v26-27).

You see, as you turn to Christ by faith for the first time, he makes you alive by his Spirit, you're born again, with a new heart, with God's laws written on it, and you begin to want to obey him. But it's not that having done that you're then faced with this choice of throwing off God's law if you're to be happy, or trying to obey it, to win his favour. There's a third way, and it's that road through the forest, it's that path across the mountain tops, it's the way of grace. Listen to what Paul writes to Titus: 'The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives' (Titus 2:11-12).

So how, does grace teach us to say 'no' to ungodliness and 'yes' to righteousness? Well, think about anger: why do you get angry in the first place? Often, isn't it because you're not getting what you want, or you're not being treated the way you want to be treated? So, often, our unrighteous anger has pride at its root. But grace humbles us, doesn't it. The grace of God tells us that whilst we think we are so great, the truth is we are so wrong, we are so bad, that Christ had to go to the cross for us. But it also tells us that we are so loved Christ did go to the cross for us.

And so the grace of God in Christ fundamentally changes the way we see ourselves – we have no pride to get angry over. But it also changes the way we see God – that he loves us so deeply. And when someone loves you like that, you don't want to hurt them, you want to live to please them, not to earn their love, but because of their love. So, instead of getting angry with this person who has crossed you, you can forgive them, because Christ has forgive you. You don't wish them dead, you wish them blessed. Because Christ has given you a new heart, and grace is teaching you.